



Visual artists' workspaces in Ireland

A new approach

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1 Background

Following discussion with visual artists' studio groups and residential facilities as part of the Partnership for the Arts consultation process, the need for a clear Arts Council policy in support of artists' workspaces was identified. This would not only assist the Arts Council in its own approach to supporting this sector, but could also provide Council with a platform to highlight the often fragile and uncertain position of visual artists' workspaces and advocate for improved provision in this area.

As a result of subsequent commitments outlined in Partnership for the Arts, the Council commissioned a *Review of Artists' Workspaces in Ireland* in December 2007, the purpose of which was 'to provide solid information to the Arts Council and relevant stakeholders on visual artists' workspaces and to make suggestions on how the Arts Council might offer responsive, sensitive and appropriate supports to these spaces in the future'. The review was presented to Council in May 2009 and published on the Arts Council's website.

As an outcome of the review, Council agreed to consider a new studio policy. This paper outlines the new policy approach.

2 Historical context

Arts Council support towards studios has evolved over time. The level of subsidy has historically been modest, and consistent minor capital support to assist members of studio groups with upkeep and facilities has been lacking. In addition, many independent studio groups are now programming in tandem with providing facilities. The marriage between facilities provision and programming generally emerges organically and becomes more strategic over time; consequently, the costs associated with the running of these dynamic programmes presents an emerging challenge for the Arts Council.

In addition to these issues, many artist-established studio groups do not have formal governance and managerial structures, arising from the fact that studio initiatives are historically resourced from the outset by artists themselves, who provide significant voluntary time and in-kind support. Importantly for the visual arts in Ireland, this often leads to exciting and vibrant work, but equally it presents the Arts Council with a dilemma and a challenge: the development of inflexible governance or managerial criteria, or an all-encompassing framework that ensures optimum transparency and accountability, risks stifling the very ethos that allowed the facilities to develop in the first place.

Significantly, the *Review of Artists' Workspaces in Ireland* has provided a profile of the sector that is of great benefit to the Council in tackling these challenges. It highlighted the most sensitive and complex issues to consider when developing a coherent, transparent policy that is designed to also protect and value the independent spirit and individuality of visual arts groups into the future.

In this policy, visual artists' workspaces are defined as:

- Studio groups comprised of four or more visual artists working on site;
- Residencies and retreats that cater for one or more visual artists at any one time;

- Local authority venues, or other buildings, that contain one or more studios or provide specific workspace for visual artists (not including presentation/exhibition spaces), e.g. print workshops.

3 Review of artists' workspaces: findings

There was a high level of consistency between the findings that emerged from the different strands of research undertaken as part of the *Review of Artists' Workspaces in Ireland*. This is clearly an exceptionally dynamic sector which, by its nature, is very fluid and constantly changing. It is also a diverse sector with a complex set of delivery models in terms of scale, governance, ownership, security of tenure and quality of physical space and facilities. As a consequence, there is no single best practice model or solution for the delivery of workspaces; however, the key findings and conclusions have application across the sector:

3.1 Shared production facilities are vital to the visual arts infrastructure

Shared production facilities provide services to some 997 visual artists and are a critical part of the visual arts production infrastructure. They provide facilities without which the production of art in disciplines such as sculpture, printmaking, photography and installation would struggle to survive. Funding continues to be a priority issue, as is expanding capacity, improving their equipment and increasing the availability of technical support staff.

3.2 Studio spaces constitute the most diverse category of workspaces

The group studios and studio complexes included in the survey of workspaces are very diverse in terms of scale, capacity, facilities, governance and quality of premises. This is a vibrant, energetic and enterprising sector and includes many workspaces that have been established by artists and groups of artists. Against the odds, the sector has built up a substantial stock of workspaces in a very tough property climate – two-thirds of the sites have emerged during the past eight years. Looking ahead, the leading priorities for studio spaces are funding, improving facilities, and professional development.

3.3 Existing capacity is limited and additional new capacity is required

Excluding residency-only sites, the current capacity provides for 997 artists in shared production facilities and 545 artists in 447 studios in studio complexes. This is proportionally comparable to provision in England but below that in Scotland. The research highlights a substantial level of unsatisfied demand for workspaces in Ireland. This arises from artists who do not have their own workspaces, from artists who will lose their workspaces due to closure, and from artists currently working at home but who are interested in taking space at a group studio facility.

3.4 Much existing workspace needs urgent improvement

A key priority for all categories of workspace is to improve the quality of the premises. The principal areas of concern include the size of workspaces, access (doors and corridors), heating, equipment security, storage, access to broadband, and health and safety requirements, including, where needed, access for people with disabilities.

3.5 Security of tenure is a constant concern for many artists

Of the respondents to the survey, 29% have serious concerns about security of tenure in their workspaces. The negative impacts of this include a loss of the sense of value in work practice, constant uncertainty, undue absorption of energy in attempting to maintain the space, and loss of time in looking for, and moving to, new spaces.

3.6 There is a significant demand for residencies

Residencies, both with and without residential accommodation, are much in demand but capacity for such residencies is very limited. It is notable that the need for more residencies was highlighted as a priority by 58% of all respondents to the survey.

3.7 The geographic distribution of workspaces is concentrated in a small number of locations

Of the available capacity, 85% is concentrated in the five cities of Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford, with Dublin and Cork accounting for 71%, excluding residency-only sites.

3.8 Ireland does not yet have large-scale studio providers

International case studies show that one of the most significant developments in the provision of workspace has been the emergence of large-scale studio providers, such as ACME in London, WASPS in Scotland and Slak in Holland. These organisations have developed with considerable support from their respective arts councils and local authorities, who have provided capital grants and subsidies to enable them to buy buildings.

3.9 Partnerships between stakeholders can deliver better and permanent workspaces

Key stakeholders include the Arts Council, local authorities and private developers who can combine resources and knowledge to deliver new space.

3.10 An advocate and a champion are required to drive forward a strategy to meet needs

An advocate is required to devise a policy and promote solutions to key stakeholders, and to assist in informing and coordinating their responses. This role is appropriate for the Arts Council. Secondly, a champion would be a valuable asset to lobby on behalf of workspaces, and provide information and a networking platform. This role is filled in England by the National Federation of Artists' Studio Providers.

3.11 Basic organisational structures would be of benefit

While support schemes for workspaces should recognise the diverse nature of the sector and the informal nature of many workspace groups, the introduction of basic organisational structures would benefit such groups into the future.

4 New policy approach

Following consideration of the review findings, further consultation and focus group meetings, the following approach to visual artists' workspaces has been adopted by Council. It addresses immediate needs, and sets out a longer term programme for the development of a healthy and dynamic studio infrastructure. It also differentiates between ongoing practical supports – funding, improvement of workspaces and professional development – and the development of partnerships and interventions which could transform the sector in the future. In practice, this policy presents the overarching objectives, strategies and related actions.

4.1 Objectives

The primary objectives for the Arts Council in relation to artists' studios and workspaces are:

- To support a diverse, dynamic and flexible group workspace infrastructure for visual artists, where supply meets demand in all counties throughout the Republic of Ireland.
- To ensure that this infrastructure is safe, secure and equally accessible to all visual artists working in the many varied arts practices that are critical to a vibrant national visual arts sector.
- To work with the sector and other partners towards the long-term sustainability of this infrastructure and to support it to gain the necessary skills to advocate for itself in an increasingly complex environment.

4.2 Strategies

Six strategies are identified to deliver the above objectives:

1. Fund visual artists' workspaces in a way that is sensitive to the dynamics and diversity of the sector.
2. Work towards improving the standards of visual artists' workspaces.
3. Work towards improved security of tenure for visual artists' workspaces.
4. Pursue opportunities to establish new purpose-built workspaces.
5. Ensure that there is an advocate/champion for visual artists' workspaces.
6. Provide skills and advice to those establishing visual artists' workspaces.

4.2.1 Fund visual artists' workspaces in a way that is sensitive to the dynamics and diversity of the sector

The following actions will deliver this policy commitment:

- Introduce a new Workspace Grant specifically for visual artists' workspaces. The grant will be offered on a non-recurring basis, with an application deadline once a year. The Workspace Grant will be up to a maximum of €30,000 and will be solely for workspace provision. Workspaces that also programme exhibitions may apply separately to the Project

Award for support towards their programmes. This grant scheme will come into effect during 2010, when a number of currently funded workspaces will be advised of a transition to workspace grants in subsequent years.

- Continue to provide Annual Funding and Regularly Funded Organisation (RFO) grants to organisations providing key technical facilities to artists.
- Introduce appropriately tiered criteria for each of the three funding streams (Workspace Grants, Annual Funding, RFO).

4.2.2 *Work towards improving the standards of visual artists' workspaces*

The following actions will deliver this policy commitment:

- Introduce an annual minor capital grant programme. These grants will be directed towards improving the quality of artists' workspaces (including artists' equipment as well as health and safety and environmental improvements).
- Require every workspace in receipt of funding to have a health and safety statement in place that complies with best practice in this area, to be delivered in partnership with relevant agencies and resource organisations.

4.2.3 *Work towards improved security of tenure for visual artists' workspaces*

The following strategies will deliver this policy commitment:

- Work with partners towards the establishment, where appropriate, of ownership rather than lease or licence models of workspace (for example ACME, England; WASPS, Scotland).
- Work with partners to increase 'cultural use' models of workspace, exploring different organisational models such as trusts and local authority ownership.

4.2.4 *Pursue opportunities to establish new purpose-built workspaces*

The following strategies will deliver this policy commitment:

- Actively seek partners to progress this ambition. These may include, but not be limited to, local authorities, development agencies and corporations, regeneration agencies, the National Asset Management Agency, the Department of the Environment and Local Government, enterprise boards, the Office of Public Works, Údaras na Gaeltachta and the Department of Tourism, Culture and Sport.
- Complete a county-by-county profile of workspace demand in partnership with local authorities.
- Advocate to local authorities that the provision of visual artists' workspace should be included in their development plans and 10-year integrated strategies.
- Establish a working group to progress this ambition, looking into models such as 'planning gain', cross subsidy, public-private partnership, and possible opportunities arising from Section 48 of the Planning and Development Act (e.g. Red Stables funded through Dublin City Council's Development Contribution Scheme).

4.2.5 Ensure that there is an advocate/champion for visual artists' workspaces

The following actions will deliver this policy commitment:

- Advocate more actively and visibly to potential partners the needs of the sector.
- Ensure that appropriate support services for this sector are mainstreamed, either within established or emerging organisations.

4.2.6 Provide skills and advice to those establishing visual artists' workspaces

The following actions are proposed to deliver this policy commitment:

- Ensure that there is an on-going service that provides skills and advice to the sector.
- Ensure the availability of guidelines for artists establishing workspaces.
- Ensure the availability of guidelines for potential providers and operators of workspaces, such as local authorities and venues.