

Creative Ireland Programme

Offaly Culture and Creativity Strategy 2018-2022

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1 Foreword

We are delighted to welcome this five-year strategy which places community collaboration centre stage for the delivery of Culture and Creativity in Offaly. The Architecture, Arts, Library and Heritage Offices in Offaly County Council have had significant collaborative projects over the past decade with three notable years of *Engage with Architecture* followed by the *Secrets of Offaly* projects. However, funding was sporadic and sourcing it, time consuming. The allocation of Creative Ireland funding now invites work in this joint space, embedded in the community.

The pilot projects in 2017 were very encouraging with Karen Power's *Sonic Pollinators* pushing the boundaries on promoting the *All-Ireland Pollinator Plan*; *Mary Ward's Amazing World of Wonder* celebrating the nineteenth century scientist and the wildlife of the raised bogs was developed by artist Caroline Conway with photographer Tina Claffey; Rachel Champion's work at Turraun with *Place of Holes* exploring carbon and peatlands with Pullough Development Group and the partnership between Offaly Historical Society and Tullamore Camera Club in the *Rahan Looks Forward* photo documentary project.

The interest in the concept of Creative Ireland was endorsed by the large attendance at Gloster House for the public consultation on the 12th September 2017, where those interested in creativity in Offaly were invited to meet and discuss the ideas that could be delivered over the five-year period.

Culture in its broadest sense can be defined as *what shapes us*. We look forward to seeing the range and scope of projects that emerge during the period of this plan.

The budget made available to the local authorities is most welcome as it allows space to plan, time to reach out, ensuring motivating, collaborative projects.

Liam Quinn
Cathaoirleach

Anna Marie Delaney
Chief Executive

2 **Culture and Creativity in Offaly**

Culture and Creativity in Offaly ranges from the early stone carvings of our medieval buildings, to forged iron gates, to the writings of Poet Egan to the microphotography of Tina Claffey. Offaly has deep roots in arts, science, history and heritage and for centuries has given rise to some of the most enduring works of creativity emanated from Ireland.

Offaly is home to over twenty early Christian monastic settlements including Clonmacnoise, Durrow and Seir Kieran; the gentle rolling hills of the Slieve Bloom Mountains; the sculptures and wildlife in the open expanses of the regenerating cut over peatlands at Lough Boora Discovery Park; and, to Birr Castle, best known for its ‘Leviathan of Parsonstown’, once the largest telescope in the world and the first from which spiral galaxies were observed, and now in 2017 with the connection to I-LOFAR a whole new chapter begins.

Creative visionaries hailing from the county include Hollywood director Rex Ingram from Kinnitty; noted nineteenth century scientist Mary Ward from Ballylin near Ferbane; engineer and inventor Bindon Blood Stoney from Birr, designer of, among other things, Dublin Port and docks; and co-founder of the renowned Grafton Architects (prestigious curators of the 2018 Venice Biennale), Yvonne Farrell from Tullamore to award winning playwright Marina Carr who grew up in Offaly.

Creative Voices

John Feehan, Birr

Culture and Creativity: landscape is the foundation

Woven into the deep foundation of creative inspiration is the influence of place: of the particular place in which the artist lives and works. And by 'artist' in this context is meant not only those of us who concentrate on the production of particular 'works' of art, but each one of us attempting in our everyday lives to respond to the immediate landscape around us, the only landscape with which we are truly intimate and in which we can be truly creative, be it as farmers or builders, poets, students or secretaries.

The landscape we inherit is itself a collective work of unconscious art, the creation of all the generations before us, more attuned than ours to the particular places of their grounding: which grew the crops and supported the animals that nourished them, filled the wells from which they drank, supplied the timber and stone from which they constructed, age over age, the cultural fabric of the landscape that is our most precious inheritance. Every detail of that precious heritage is deserving of our attention, demanding of us an awareness of its place in the overall interweaving pattern of nature and culture: fields and walls and homes and graveyards, woodland and forest and the flowers along the way: for where the cultural detail of archaeology and architecture are the weft of landscape pattern, what remains of the natural diversity and character of our home place is its warp.

The fabric of the unique character of place resides largely in the natural and cultural heritage detail superimposed on the more broadly-sketched 'landscape' of the place. The colour and meaning of landscape is found and experienced at the high magnification and scale of local detail. In this most fundamental sense, *every* landscape is a heritage landscape.

Every thing in this pattern carries a meaning to which the artist – in the narrower sense now – more particularly, may respond: the common flowers by the side of the road, or the stonework of a bridge; and the patterns of the landscape fabric of which these are individual stitches are what constitutes the distinctive character of particular local places: county or parish, street or village or town.

The fabric of the unique character of place resides largely in the natural and cultural detail superimposed on the more broadly-sketched 'landscape' of the place. The colour and meaning of landscape is found and experienced at the high magnification and scale of local detail. Every stitch counts; the loss of any one is a loss for which there is no replacement thread.

With the erosion of the local natural and cultural detail in the landscape we are seeing the unravelling of the heritage fabric at 'stitch level' (as it were), the erosion of the material detail in which the character, the uniqueness of local place is spelled out in the landscape. And with it we are experiencing the unravelling of the sense of belonging, which many of us believe to be so central to healthy human living. An insensitivity to place now pervades the grass roots of our society. Maybe we can do without the aesthetic that appreciates the poetry of Seamus Heaney or the painting of Roderick O'Connor. But this we cannot forego, because while the words will always be on the page or in the mind and the canvas will stay in the gallery till doomsday, the poetry and beauty shaped by nature and time and the slow dance with which farming and craft have woven meaning into the tapestry of the land is being eroded: slowly enough for us not to notice in the short span of our own lifetimes.

This is why such recent projects as the initiative of the community at Pullough to explore and celebrate the central role of brick in the unique fabric of its particular landscape; or the celebration in colour and light of local biological diversity by Caroline Conway and Tina Claffey are among the most significant initiatives in creativity in recent times. We look forward to a kindling of future initiatives across the county similarly inspired by the intimate places we call home.

Niamh Murray, Ballycumber, 18

It was once said that creativity is the greatest rebellion in existence, and it is true to admit that Offaly, as a county, is leading this rebellion. From a young age, I have always had a passion for the arts, over a spectrum of creative writing, visual arts and music.

The publishing of my children's book 'A Full Irish Christmas' in 2011 was greatly supported by both the people of Offaly and the Arts Department of Offaly County Council. The tale of an adventure around the world with Santa was penned when I was ten years old, in fifth class. However, when I was twelve, I chose to publish the book in aid of Temple Street Children's Hospital. Over the weeks preceding Christmas 2011, I sold one thousand copies of my short story, raising €4369 for the hospital.

This was not my first time to be inspired to put pen to paper. Throughout my time in Boher National school in Ballycumber, I took part in many initiatives such as short story and poetry competitions. I was fortunate, along with other primary school students from Offaly, to have one of my poems printed in the 'Write a Poem' book. I guess you could say that was my first taste of being a published author, although it is safe to say I am still no Seamus Heaney!

My passion for singing also began in the Faithful County, when I joined Boher Church choir directed by Majella Killeen at the tender age of five. The choir was comprised of young and enthusiastic singers from all over our county. My experience travelling around the country performing encouraged me to join the Moate Community School choir, under the wing of Lorna Duignan, when I began secondary school, and we were successful in winning the All Island School's choir competition in 2014. I also began vocal training lessons and completed my eight grades of singing with distinction.

Our county has, and will continue to offer countless support to those who wish to inspire others. One of Ireland's most popular living artists, Mark O'Neill began his career in the Millhouse in Killeigh, County Offaly. Indeed, Charlotte Brönte, author of Jane Eyre spent time in Banagher during her writing career.

Although I am now studying Law and Business in UCC, I often think back to those early days when I discovered my love of the arts, and Offaly was the inspiration.

Yvonne Farrell, Architect, Grafton Architects

Culture is a word, which is hard to define, but Culture is the concrete evidence of ourselves, as human beings. We need to protect Culture and we need to grow Creativity. Like anything that grows, seeds need to be sown - not seeds of doubt - but seeds of possibilities.

There is a phenomenon of synergy, where ideas spark off one another, giving life to something new and unexpected. This is what happens in creative communities. We might never know about the young girl or boy, woman or man, who, because of hearing a poet read their work, because of seeing a float in the St.Patrick's Day Parade, because of watching a local play, gets the courage to become involved. We might never know what gives a person the inspiration to create. We can only provide the conditions, the encouragement, the catalysts.

Creative Communities provide opportunities for people who never thought that they might become involved, benefit from their own creativity, share their talents, enjoy themselves and let their imaginations grow. The Library is probably one of the most radical spaces in contemporary society - one of the last free spaces in our communities - positioned at the cutting edge of creativity, because it is the Public Room for the youngest to the oldest citizen . The Library can be the place where communities feel supported, where they can develop.

If we remember the sean fhocal : '*Mol an Oige agus tiocfaidh said'Praise the young , and they will succeed , they will bloom, they will develop.* It is important to remember that encouragement is not only for the young, but for all age groups within communities. Imagination is a force, which needs to be valued, nurtured and enjoyed.

3. The Creative Ireland Vision for Offaly

Culture and Creativity Plan and Arts, Heritage and Library Plans

There are three separate plans for County Offaly for Arts, Heritage and the Libraries. The area this programme is focusing on is the joint space where these areas overlap that are rooted in community collaboration and reach into the wider community. All the county plans come under the Local Economic and Community Development Plan 2016-21.

The vision of Creative Ireland and the Culture and Creativity Plan for Offaly 2018-22 is that every person living in Ireland will have the opportunity to fully realise his or her creative potential. The vision is pursued through the Five-Pillars of the Creative Ireland Programme:

- Pillar 1: Enabling the Creative Potential of Every Child
- Pillar 2: Enabling Creativity in Every Community
- Pillar 3: Investing in our Creative and Cultural Infrastructure
- Pillar 4: The Creative Industries: Ireland as a Centre of Excellence in Media Production
- Pillar 5: Unifying our Global Reputation

Participation and access are central to the vision. Connecting artists and other creative producers to communities is also regarded as essential to realising the vision.

Offaly's Culture Team has the mandate to lead on Pillar 2, *Enabling the Creativity in Every Community*. However, the Council's role is not exclusive to Pillar 2 and the Council will collaborate with communities, groups and agencies to assist with developing and delivering the four other pillars.

4. The Creative Ireland Values in Offaly

The Creative Ireland values are the basis for the strategy and programming in Offaly for the five-year programme. The pilot projects in 2017 showed the **strength of collaboration** bringing artists, heritage expertise and local communities together exploring aspects of their heritage. Partnerships bring stronger, deeper and longer lasting results.

All Creative Ireland projects will be **community focused**, this may be the local community, school, special interest group, a Tidy Towns group or as in Pillar 5: *Unifying our Global Reputation* engaging with the diaspora community through information regarding their ancestors or the place they came from. This has been clearly demonstrated by the Offaly Digby collection which went on line in 2016 and the outreach to descendants of those who left the area worldwide can be seen engaging with this resource. The more relevant the project is to the community the more meaningful it will be. The provision of specific archive material that is of immediate provenance to relations abroad is very tangible and more meaningful than a generic Irish brand message. This includes capacity building within communities and for artists and those working in heritage to work together.

There is a focus to increase **participation rather than passive involvement** and this is demonstrated by the engagement of a number of communities in the *Mary Ward's Amazing World of Wonder* project.

By investing in community based participation it is hoped to build a solid foundation in Offaly and through our local communities and engaging with our diaspora we can ensure this genuine **inclusivity and empowerment** will reap many innovative and enduring projects.

5. **The Strategic Priorities for Offaly**

This five-year strategy is to bring coherence and promote collaboration between the individual culture based strategies, the Offaly Heritage Plan 2017-22, Offaly Arts Plan 2017-22 (pending), Offaly Libraries Plan (under review) all of which relate to the Offaly Local Economic and Community Development Plan 2016-21.

Consultation commenced with an evening on 4th April 2017 in Tullamore Library when John Concannon, the then Director of the Creative Ireland National Programme, made a presentation to 70 members of the public outlining the programme and setting out the role of local authorities. This was followed by a day long information programme, hosted by the Offaly Culture Team, in Gloster House, Brosna on Tuesday, 12th September 2017 and was attended by 75 people. The aims were: to provide an understanding of the Creative Ireland objectives; introduce people to others in the county and thereby build collaborations; to learn about the pilot programmes being delivered in Offaly in 2017; and, to invite submissions from the public. Following this public call for submissions twenty four written submissions were received, in addition to those given on the 12th, by the closing date in October 2017. These submissions and the public's ideas garnered at the Information Day helped to shape this plan. The Offaly Culture Team will continue to liaise with the various groups and individuals to develop these links and proposals further, bearing in mind Offaly County Council's main responsibility to deliver pillar 2 but also to assist where appropriate in delivering the other four pillars.

Strategic Priorities in Offaly County Council

The strategic priorities have been shaped having regard to the following realities:

- Pillar 2 *Enabling Creativity in Every Community* is the main focus of Local Authorities. The overlap and interaction with the four other pillars of Creative Ireland is important and will be made explicit where it occurs.
- The programme is operational in focus rather than capital.
- This programme is rooted in collaboration. If a project relates solely to arts, heritage, libraries or community then it falls under the remit of the 5-year plans for those areas rather than this plan.
- The Offaly Culture Team has limited capacity to develop programming.
- Programming will be determined taking staffing resources within the Offaly Culture Team into account.

Pillar 1 Children and Youth - Enabling the Creative Potential of Every Child

While a separate national strategy has been launched by the Creative Ireland Team on 7th December 2017 the Council is keen to assist in this key area with particular reference to the STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Maths), Music Generation and culture and creative programming for children in the library and community.

Pillar 2 Creative Communities - Enabling Creativity in Every Community

2.1. Lough Boora Parklands

A significant agreement was made in 2017 between Bord na Móna and Offaly County Council to manage the sculptures at Lough Boora Discovery Park. This park, based on '*where art and nature meet*', is a perfect example of how art and heritage can work together, as demonstrated by the 105,000 thousand visitors recorded in 2017. During the period of the plan it is proposed to collaborate with Bord na Móna to maximise this resource.

2.2. Library Cultural Programming

The library service has a wide remit, a unique relationship with communities and considerable scope to reach into the community through its network of branch libraries. It has been developing a programme of workshops, spaces, exhibitions, performances and talks and promotes participation rather than passive observation. It is planned to invite applications for a panel that the library can draw from to enhance this evolving service for the wider community.

2.3. Key Commissions

In 2017 it was decided to invite artists to respond to the key area of the 'All Ireland Pollinator Plan' which led to the exciting collaboration with composer Karen Power. Each year a key area will be selected for a **significant commission** that promotes an area of Offaly's heritage through art. 2018 is the European Year of Cultural Heritage and this will be an area to explore. Suggested themes are 'Made in Ireland' or 'Early Christian Ireland'.

In 2017 Offaly County Council and Laois County Council had a joint call for artists to respond to the subject of pollination. This approach afforded us the opportunity to widen the scope of the project and provides for inter county collaboration and the

exchange of expertise. It is proposed to undertake a number of **inter county or regional projects** during the period of this plan.

Another approach under consideration is the development of a **residency in the community** working with the three Municipal Districts. For example, an architect, poet, historian, ecologist, film maker, choreographer or dramatist to promote research and explore their area of interest.

2.4.a Community Led Creative Projects

In 2017 Offaly County Council piloted a call for projects whereby communities had to collaborate and work with a range of artists to explore aspects of their heritage. This proved to be very effective in deepening the communities' engagement and a number of innovative approaches and projects were delivered. The budget was €2,500 per project. It is proposed to extend this call to communities with a range of funding options. Feedback from our public consultations has shown an interest in developing projects under the themes *Know your Place* or *Personalities*.

2.4.b Cruinniú

In 2017 Offaly's Cruinniú na Cásca was celebrated on Easter Sunday at Lough Boora Discovery Park. The National Creative Ireland Team plans to develop and embed Cruinniú events throughout the country into the future with a child based event during June . The Offaly Culture Team working with community groups will liaise with the National Creative Ireland Team to celebrate Cruinniú in Offaly.

2.5. Cultural Mapping

The National Creative Ireland Team is keen to explore the undertaking of an audit and mapping of creative resources for each county. As this process evolves, time and resources may be needed for Offaly to gather and present the information relevant to Offaly.

Pillar 3: Investing in our Creative and Cultural Infrastructure

This Pillar will largely be driven by the National Creative Ireland team as the resources allocated are operationally focused and capital funding will need to come from alternative sources. However, minor projects and studies to facilitate our Creative and Cultural Infrastructure may be considered here.

Pillar 4 – Creative Industries –Ireland as a Centre of Excellence in Media Production

FilmOffaly, Offaly County Council’s film commission, has grown from strength to strength since its inception in 1998. In partnership with Filmbase, the FilmOffaly/ Filmbase annual bursary has seen the production of numerous short films in the county, many of which have gone on to win prestigious awards. There is a strong media and film production sector in the county. Working with the OFFline Film Festival in Birr Offaly County Council initiated Mini Movies in 2012 which has run annually since then. It aims to bring quality film production skills to primary and secondary school pupils. Film professionals engage in workshops with the pupils over a number of days, the culminating result is a short film that is premiered at Birr Theatre and Arts Centre during the OFFline Film Festival. The Offaly Culture Team recognising this as a great opportunity, is keen to build on this programme and support initiatives in this area through all avenues open to them. In 2018 support has been offered to the first ever OFFline Animation Residency. The successful candidates will embed themselves within the local community and develop a project over six months, culminating in a public screening of their work at the OFFline Film Festival.

Pillar 5 Global Reputation - Unifying our Global Reputation

There is an opportunity here to provide meaningful connections with the diaspora through providing them with primary source material relating to the townland and family records. This can be done through a comprehensive county archive, cataloguing records so they are intelligible, developing online digitisation of archive records held in County Offaly, and, documenting Offaly in good quality publications. The Offaly Archives Strategy reflects a strong partnership between Offaly History and Offaly County Council. www.offalyhistoryarchives.com provides connections with the diaspora through specific information about people and place and original documents comprehensively referenced. This project commenced in 2016 and it is planned to continue to make archival material from Offaly accessible on line.

This is in line with and complements the work being carried out by the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Offaly County Diaspora Strategy *‘this is Offaly, Reaching Out & Engaging with Our Diaspora, Offaly Diaspora Strategy 2017-2020’*.

6. Implementation in 2018

Facilitation

The two consultation meetings in 2017 showed the benefits that can be gained from providing further opportunities for those involved in culture and creativity to meet and actively engage in planning, developing and delivering collaborative projects. It was recognised that many people had not had a regular opportunity or structure to develop these links before. The Offaly Culture Team will continue to help to foster and support these linkages and bringing people together.

Annual Programming

An annual work programme will be devised by the Offaly Culture Ireland Team with reference to the budget available and the experience of delivering the previous years' programmes.

Community projects will be advertised, in a timely manner, to allow for consultation and collaboration and to facilitate the delivery of each project in order that they may make their financial claims by the autumn of each year.

The consultation process indicated a clear interest in letting people know how the delivery of the plan progresses and, to this end, the Offaly Culture Team will communicate progress on projects delivered.

National Creative Ireland Team and County Co-ordinator

This is a new programme and close contact with the National Creative Ireland Team is important to shape the delivery of the five-year plan and to learn from the progress and experience of other counties. We will continue to liaise with the National Creative Ireland Team to learn from shared experiences particularly in the early stages of this Creative Ireland programme.

Communication and updates

The Offaly Public Participation Network (PPN) is the County Council's main structure for community contact. Currently there are 265 groups registered with the PPN. Accordingly, the PPN will be a key resource for the Offaly Culture Team and Bridie Costello Hynes, the PPN Resource Worker for Offaly, will help to ensure that community engagement in the development and delivery of the programme is maximised.

Offaly County Council, the Arts Office, Heritage Office and Library Service and the PPN all have social media accounts. These will be used to advertise updates and project developments for the Creative Offaly projects. The local media will be notified of projects and press releases issued as appropriate. The Arts Office, Heritage Office and Library services have email lists for news and events. To register for updates please email artsoffice@offalycoco.ie and/or heritage@offalycoco.ie. Information relating to Creative Ireland will also be hosted on www.offaly.ie with details of published plans and ongoing projects.

The Offaly Heritage Office hosts a one-day seminar each November and this has and will continue to provide an opportunity to profile Creative Offaly projects.

The County Coordinator will submit updates to the Chief Executive's Report for County Council meetings on a regular basis. Each member of the Offaly Culture Team will provide updates, as appropriate, to their Strategic Policy Committee and liaise with their contacts and various groups during the course of their work.

7. The Offaly Culture Team

The team will be led by the Director of Services with the arts, corporate services, community and local development, architecture and heritage all represented.

County Coordinator

The county coordinator is one of 31 coordinators who work as a national team to deliver Creative Ireland to communities across the country. The co-ordinator of the Creative Offaly programme will be appointed annually from the Offaly Culture Team.