



## **Festival Makers Forum Report**

### ***Festival making in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic***

A series of five facilitated online gatherings, an Arts Council initiative.

**30<sup>th</sup> November to 11<sup>th</sup> December 2021.**

## **Introduction**

Festivals are central to the country's arts infrastructure providing opportunities for artists to present work and providing the public with opportunities to participate in and experience the arts. During the Covid-19 pandemic, professional and voluntary festival makers worked to sustain their organisations, maintain creative engagement with artists and devise innovative ways to engage with the public. Festivals demonstrated resilience and flexibility during this time but the impact to organisations and on their resources is unclear as public health measures continue to develop and evolve.

In order to better understand the challenges currently facing festivals, the Arts Council hosted a series of focussed discursive sessions; a forum for festival makers to share their learning from 2021 and to examine how best the viability and sustainability of festival organisations could be supported.

This report is the culmination of a series of discussions with festival makers operating across a range of scales, artforms and locations, outlining themes that emerged from discussions with small to medium scale festivals, followed by a review with larger festivals. The findings of this report will help to inform the Arts Council's support of festivals as the sector continues to navigate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

## **1. Context**

Ireland's festival ecology ranges from small-scale voluntary and community based festivals established to support and enhance local cultural provision, to local festivals which draw national audiences along with large-scale professionalised festivals with significant national and international programmes. A broad range of operating models of all scales are often interwoven into the histories and identities of the places in which they occur and support both the development and presentation of single and multi-disciplinary art forms.

The operating environment for festivals during 2020 and 2021 has fluxuated; Public health restrictions brought about by the pandemic resulted in the curtailing of the type of work that could be presented, reduced audience capacities, and increased health and safety costs. Digital transmission as a temporary solution to presenting events brought with it both challenges and opportunities. This facilitated access to new audiences and in some cases allowed for the establishment of international artistic partnerships as online activity developed, however longer-term digital fatigue in audiences emerged, along with the challenge of festivals creating digital content where it was difficult to monetise presentations.

The business model often associated with festivals provided organisations with a challenging financial environment; with limited opportunities to raise box office income, sponsorship opportunities reducing and some public subsidy becoming curtailed or restricted in the short-term.

While festivals have demonstrated flexibility in pivoting their operational models; scenario planning different iterations of their festival programmes in response to changing public health measures, the impact on resources and staffing has challenged organisations resulting in increased and unsustainable workload during this time period. In addition the longer-term impact on the festival ecology is starting to emerge with organisations experiencing difficulties in recruiting production teams and retaining both volunteers and audiences.

## **2 Small-medium scale festival discussions**

The facilitated discussions with small and medium scale Arts Council funded festivals took place over four sessions. The first three were open to festivals of various artform focus, the fourth, restricted to literature and film festivals, focussed on understanding the role of digital dissemination in programming and future festival delivery.

### **2.1 Overall findings among this cohort**

In general, while there was a continued sense of caution among the organisers of small and medium scale festivals about the impact of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic on festival activity, there was a feeling of positivity about the learnings gained and applied over the last two years. In particular, many festivals commented that, having weathered the storm of cancelling or pivoting to alternative models in 2020, they were 'better prepared' for their 2021 festival editions. However, it was articulated that this

resilience had come at a price, and that the year could be characterised by a ‘generosity of approach’ among festival boards, committees, volunteers, staff and artists, in order to ensure safe and viable festival programmes during a time when public health measures were consistently changing. In all four sessions most small-medium scale festivals believed their resources and organisational capacity was ‘overstretched’; many experiencing fatigue from implementing contingency plans, responding quickly to public health measures and adapting to last minute changes.

The key challenges and opportunities impacting small-medium scale festivals were:

## 2.2 Positive outcomes

**Relationship with artists** – festivals in this cohort noted that the relationship between artists and festivals has been evolving in various ways throughout the pandemic:

- Many festivals commented that in 2020 they moved quickly to support artists to continue making work despite public health restrictions. Most festivals explored alternative forms of presentation with artists; including worked transmitted via online, audio works, one-person experiences, and socially distanced events for example.
- Using insights gained from activities delivered in 2020 and 2021 during public health restrictions, festival makers outlined how collaborating with artists was evolving; instead of presenting work based on the repertoires available, the pandemic had led to new engagement with artists about what they would like to develop and present. As a result, more collaborative approaches had emerged.

**Strengthening digital infrastructure** – responding to the pandemic forced many festivals to strengthen their digital infrastructure, including filming, broadcasting/streaming, developing social media presence/profiles, producing podcasts and radio shows. For some festivals, this resulted in the development of new skills among committee members and staff, which many felt could be applied to help future proof festival events. For others, strengthening digital infrastructure involved the engagement of professional services; with little opportunity for knowledge retention to be shared amongst festival staff/teams.

**Digital impact** – some festivals acknowledged that a digital festival was not a viable option (reasons given included the digital realm not fitting with the organisation’s mission, financial considerations, and lack of digital infrastructure for festivals and for the public). Those who did proceed with digital festivals spoke of increases in viewership and engagement from national and international audiences, although it was acknowledged that the retention of this work in addition to ‘festival duties as usual’ would require additional resources and staffing.

- It was widely acknowledged that access to a new cohort of artists afforded by digital formats was, at least initially, a welcome development for the sector. Festival makers spoke about gaining access to artists who would have been traditionally unavailable to smaller festivals when operating an in-person festival. (In some cases literature festivals were able to programme artists of International standing; not available to them when producing an in-person festival format).

- ‘Going digital’ helped to reduce barriers for accessing festival activities for audiences (geographical boundaries and physical barriers removed). There were examples provided where festivals were working to retain and develop some digital events for those that are unable to attend in-person activities.
- The environmental benefits of digital production resulting in the reduction of travel for artists and audiences was also raised as a positive outcome.
- Digital viewing or listening parties were used by one festival – this allowed people to gather rather than experience digital events in isolation.

**Festival network & supports** – festival makers made reference to the value and importance of partnership and collaboration; the range of stakeholders and partners, e.g., the local community, local authorities, other festivals, arts organisations and other partner was considered essential in order to deliver their activities.

**Capacity Building Support Scheme (CBSS)** – some festivals outlined that CBSS had afforded them an opportunity to pause and reflect on their remit and activities and to take steps to future-proof the festival, with several using scheme supports to conduct longer-term strategic reviews and support the transition of their organisational models. The scheme also supported the development of ‘festival consortia’ (a conglomeration of festival organisations) that enabled sharing of knowledge, learnings, and provided some operational infrastructure; in some cases pooling resources and providing a network for members. (Examples of these include: Birr Festivals Collective and West Cork Arts Festivals, Early Music Network and Meath Festivals.).

**Reconnecting with place & local audiences** – despite the challenges, engaging local audiences, and (re)connecting with place was deemed to be important among festival makers. Many respondents believed it was important to continue to deliver programmes for local audiences, particularly periods when public health guidelines were relaxed allowing for activities to take place in the public realm.

## 2.3 Challenges

**Long-term viability & sustainability of festival planning** – most festivals expressed concern about the long-term viability of having to plan multiple possible festival scenarios in order to compensate for changing public health guidelines. At the time of the sessions, many were planning at least three festival formats: live/in person, hybrid (in-person and digital) and digital. This has led to increased and demanding workloads across all aspects of festival production which had ‘overstretched’ festival organisations. While this was acknowledged as an interim measure, there was agreement that this was not sustainable in the long-term. A small number of festivals have chosen to pause their festivals for one year before committing to a return.

**Fractures in the festival ecosystem** – noted was the departure of many skilled contractors who have retrained or left the industry, and the depletion of volunteers. For some festivals, the reduction in numbers has been due to the age demographic of volunteers who could be deemed vulnerable in the context of the pandemic, while for others, this was due to the increased expectations of/demand on volunteers to take on increased responsibilities. In addition, the replacement of live events with digital presentations meant that volunteers were not always required in the same numbers. Over time,

retaining the same cohort of people proved difficult for festival organisations. Further, some professional services (such as digital experts) had taken the place of volunteers in assisting the delivery of festival programmes. While funding supported these costs short-term, it exposed particular deficits in supporting hybrid festival models such as: acquiring additional resources to support digital to high standards, the hidden subsidy of volunteering on festival operating models, the requirement to invest in volunteer training to support the delivery of hybrid models for example.

**Digital poverty & digital fatigue** – more recently festival organisations have observed the onset of digital fatigue amongst their audiences. In addition, festivals with summer programmes reported significant reductions in digital audience numbers in 2021 citing that digital engagements were more popular in other seasons indicating a pattern potentially beginning to emerge in audience behaviours in relation to digital interaction. It was also noted that for some, digital and broadband infrastructure in the towns and villages in which they operate was not sufficient to produce/facilitate digital events. Festivals were also aware that not all audiences will have the means to access digital content. Ethical considerations were raised with regard to digital services which were paid at significant cost when it was acknowledged that festival sector workers such as artists, volunteers, administrators were subsidising arts programming.

**Maintaining artistic integrity & production values when operating in a digital environment** – while festivals continue to explore online presentations, a number reported that their organisations were operating in a saturated and highly competitive digital environment. Having been exposed to a range of streamed and broadcast activities over the course of 21 months, audiences had come to expect high production values for streamed content; often festival operators were unable to compete, unable to monetise this output and unable to generate the volume of content required to be competitive. In addition festival makers outlined concerns about the adaptability of some art forms to the digital 'realm'. Overall, costs for producing high quality content has increased, while audience engagement has not kept pace. Moreover, it was felt that the "connection with place", which continues to be a motivating factor for small-medium festivals, was lost when they entered the digital space. In particular, when surveyed, film and literature festivals that had adapted to digital formats with relative ease expressed their commitment to returning to in-person/live programmes referring to digital as important but in-person engagement as essential.

**Audience stability** – in the absence of engagement with audiences for almost two years, festival makers were concerned about the stability of their audience base, particularly festivals that engage specific/targeted audience demographics (i.e. children and young people) that they now believe will be difficult to re-engage.

**Increased costs** – the cost of doing festival business has increased. Concerns were raised about:

- financial costs of producing digital content (and the investment in the infrastructures required) versus the payments made to artists producing work are currently unbalanced;
- the hidden subsidies of festival making, in relation to the significant contribution of volunteer and distribution of staff time;
- The 'generosity of approach' of festival organisers tasked with scenario planning and responses.

### 3 Medium-large scale festival discussion

- Medium-large scale Arts Council funded festivals generally acknowledged that some online programming would form part of their programming into the future, however, there was overwhelming agreement that over the last two years, whether in the digital realm or in-person events, festivals had lacked ‘festivity’. The absence of festivity, associated with ‘congregating in place and time’, creating an environment where ‘artists and public encounter each other’, ‘where the cross-pollination of ideas takes place’, greatly diminished social and artistic impact of festivals.

*“The ability to make audiences feel welcome has hampered the festival experience”.*

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#### 3.1 Overall findings among this cohort

Findings here were similar to the experiences of the small-medium scale festivals, however, given the greater scale of these operations, the challenges faced by these organisations were more acute. In particular financial models have been significantly affected. Pre-pandemic the financial model of large festival organisations was a mix of public funding, box office/activity income, and sponsorship/philanthropy income. Much reduced, there was continuing uncertainty about how box offices would perform in the future. In addition it was acknowledged that the landscape for commercial investment had changed with corporate reticence to support programmes impacting the festival business model. While some larger festival organisations were able to invest in significant digital infrastructure, the monetisation of this medium was viewed as limited. It was also notable that while embracing digital dissemination as part of their operating model going forward, there was a strong desire among this festival cohort to ‘return to live’, to rebuild the connections between time and place, audience, artists, and the festival.

*“Digital can’t be the cost of doing business (it is not a sales driver) it is an excellent tool for accessibility. Festivals are an expression of time and place and digital upends this”*

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#### 3.2 Positive outcomes

**Engaging audiences** – many reported positive experiences in reaching new audiences through digital means and reimagining how festivals could engage with the public. For example, Dublin Fringe Festival created a number of interactive digital creative projects and programmes and Carlow Arts Festival commissioned artists to develop digitally native new art works.

**Contributing to local arts provision & infrastructure** – in order to stage events and respond to public health restrictions, a few temporary venues were built contributing to the local arts infrastructure, in

particular the Geodesic Domes created by Clonmel Junction Festival have unlocked new ways of engaging and developing audiences and created new approaches to programming.

**Supporting artists** - there was a strong sense of obligation to honour promises made to artists and to support them to continue making work; festivals makers believed they had a pastoral role to play here in supporting the wider arts ecology.

**Digital/remote benefits** – not only for audiences, but for artists’ development, remote working was acknowledged as a positive outcome for engaging artists or those who could not attend development initiatives in person.

### 3.3 Challenges

**Vulnerability of festival staff & organisations** – festival organisations outlined that the operational and production fabric of the festival ecology, particularly for large festivals, has been damaged, losing a skilled workforce that had left the arts profession to up-skill in other industries. This has resulted in production deficits and festivals having to reinvest in training and skills development. In locations where festivals significantly contribute to cultural provision in their local area this has also impacted the local arts infrastructure.

*“With skilled staff having left the industry to retrain “the fragile cobweb of a local arts ecology has been damaged”.*

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**Remodelling** –in response to the pandemic some festival organisations developed new festival models such as ‘slow festival making’ or programming over an extended timeframe. This provided an opportunity for organisations to increase their visibility over a longer period and offer a consistent, rather than concentrated, programme of events. While positively disposed to this temporary programme solution in negotiating public health restrictions, most festivals indicated that this is difficult to sustain longer term resulting in extended production and planning timeframes, increased competition with other cultural events and festivals, and over extending resources.

**International connectivity** – while it was recognised that certain international aspects of festival programme were enhanced, such as the development of new international audiences and developing opportunities with a cohort of international artists, it was generally recognised that for large-scale festivals, the paucity of visiting international work had an impact on the programme that could be offered to Irish audiences. This has the potential to have a longer term impact on the professional skills development of Irish artists. Festivals provide a necessary bedrock for artists to exchange skills and develop; without the opportunity for Irish artists to engage in international exchange, this could have an impact on the quality of work made by Irish artists in the future. Given the periphery of the island of Ireland, international cultural connections need to be maintained in the short-term and reimagined/rebuilt longer term.

**Reputational issues** - it was acknowledged that festivals had delivered their in-person programmes with robust public health and safety measures in place. While there had not been a reported case of Covid-19 at an arts festival, there was agreement that any such outbreak could have a detrimental impact on audiences for festival events and on the reputation of the festivals sector. Festivals have continued to work tirelessly to ensure the health and safety of audiences, staff, and artists which has led to increased and demanding workloads and increased safety measures.

**Monetising digital content** - while larger festivals are perhaps financially better prepared to stream content, there are still significant cost implications, a range of skills required, and high production qualities expected. Many noted that monetising this content will not contribute significantly to income and won't replace all losses in relation to sponsorship or box office. It was acknowledged that festival have achieved a fraction of the income generated in 2019 when in-person events were allowed without restriction.

**Economic losses** - significant economic losses for towns and cities owing to reductions in visitors to festivals was also noted. Further, it was noted that some local suppliers have also been affected by festivals pivoting their business models to mainly digital. The impact on festival stakeholder partnerships during this time cannot be underestimated and festivals outlined there was work to do in repairing and re-establishing these relationships as restrictions ease.

**Audiences** - restrictions and continued exposure to booking changes/cancellations is depleting confidence and audience stability. Festivals are unclear about how audiences will behave in the future and when or if they will come back. In addition, it was acknowledged that festivals generally market their programme to a largely 'local' or domestic market which, prior to the pandemic, allowed festivals to analyse and understand the behaviour patterns of their audiences. Operating in both digital and hybrid formats, festivals faced the challenge of marketing to new audiences they know relatively little about. This will overtime require festivals to pivot or develop their marketing and development strategies in relation to this new audience cohort.

#### **4. Key Themes Emerging**

This report reflects the considerable efforts made by festival makers across Ireland while dealing with the exceptional public health measures brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. The growing and complex festival ecology in Ireland is such that each organisation is likely to face a unique set of challenges and opportunities, however, findings indicate several common themes among festival makers regardless of model, artform or the geographic location of the festivals that took part in the sessions. The scale of these impacts and outcomes are dependent on festival size:

- Across all festival groups, there was a strong and pressing desire to return to in-person programmes and presentations; to re-establish programmes which respond to place and provide audiences opportunity to explore the geographies of a curated programme safely. However, there is an acknowledgment that at least in the short term, hybrid festival models (i.e. digital and in person events) will be required;
- Strengthened digital infrastructure provides opportunities for developing new audiences for many festivals, however, this comes at a significant costs both in terms of production,

- staffing, and in terms of the constraints placed on artists/artforms to present work in a digital environment. Additionally, opportunities and potential for monetising this content long-term is not yet clear;
- Serious concerns among all groups were raised about the viability and sustainability of increased and demanding workloads, especially festival and contingency planning;
  - Developing initiatives/supports that address fatigue, burnout, and fractures in the festival community will be vitally important as organisations emerge from the pandemic;
  - Rebuilding audiences and instilling confidence in festival goers was of primary concern to all festivals and it was recognised that this will take time and resources to return to 2019 attendance levels;
  - The funding commitments and supports provided to festivals by the Arts Council throughout the pandemic have been well received. In particular Capacity Building supports have been a vital lifeline, both as a means for reacting in the short term to public health restrictions, but also crucially, these supports have allowed for longer-term strategic planning. Continued supports are helpful during a time where festival models may have to respond the shifting landscape of their stakeholders but these supports can be developmental in addition to financial. The development of skills and knowledge was acknowledged as important for the sector as they embrace new ways of engaging/reengaging audiences.

## 5. Supports/sectoral needs

It was acknowledged that continuing conversations and discussions about festival making and festival practice were important and there was real value in sharing information, skills and learning. While festivals operate in very distinct contexts and at varying scales of operation there are shared practices which can inform the development of a festivals sector and encourage further professionalisation of festival making and good practice in festival delivery.

Festival makers were invited to propose initiatives/ideas/supports to address the challenges faced by the sector in both the short and long term:

- Festival makers were encouraged by recent initiatives delivered by the Arts Council (i.e. [Changemakers Festival Conference](#) and [Pathways Webinar Series](#)). These initiatives provide important opportunities for exchange and networking, which many felt was crucially important to building a more robust festival sector in Ireland. The groups called for greater opportunities for networking and also for agency supports (such as the RAISE programme) which provided opportunities for professional development; of particular note - succession/ scenario planning and marketing and development were noted as areas where agencies could provide support or introduce models of good practice.
- New festival models have begun to emerge; groups of festivals located in different locations across the country have begun to develop consortia festival models to share challenges, collaborate, pool resources, and communicate collectively about a series of annual festivals in the local community. This was noted as a welcome development, and the groups expressed interest in understanding more about the outcome of these initiatives. Analysing

- and communicating the benefits of these consortia could help festival makers to consider new festival models and build resilience into the future;
- Professional development of festival makers through, for instance, mentorship was raised as a potentially fruitful avenue for concentrating support efforts. Mentorship between local community festival makers and those operating in professionalised settings for example would allow for the development of skills and knowledge thereby strengthening the sustainability and artistic/business acumen of festivals while promoting collaboration and entrepreneurship;
  - The group emphasised that articulating the importance of the festivals and the vast networks involved in the making of festivals was crucial. In the absence of a resource organisation, it was felt that the festival sector is lacking a representative body to demonstrate leadership and to voice the concerns of the community in order to strengthen supports more broadly. Such a resource would be invaluable and would support a plethora of initiatives designed to support this broad and varied sector.

### **Report by Dr David Teevan and Danielle Lynch**

### **With thanks...**

The Arts Council wishes to acknowledge the contribution of those festival organisations that attended the Festival Makers Forum discussions:

#### **Small-Medium scale festival discussions:**

Traidphicnic, Gap Arts Festival, West Cork Fit-Up Festival, Polish Arts Festival, Murder One Literary Festival, New Ross Piano Festival, Galway Early Music Festival, National Circus Festival, Garageland Festival, Dublin Book Festival, Dingle Literary Festival, Ennis Book Club Festival, Catalyst International Film Festival, Fastnet Film Festival, Poetry at the Mills/Fingal Arts Festival, East Asia Film Festival, First Cut Youth Film Festival, Strokestown International Poetry Festival, Winter Warmer Poetry Festival, Féile na Tána, Clonakilty International Guitar Festival, Dublin International Chamber Music Festival, Mother Tongues Festival, Galway Theatre Festival, Clifden Arts Festival, Féile na Bealtaine, Dingle, Kilrush Trad Festival, Shorelines Festival, Boyle Arts Festival, West Wicklow Festival, Grasshoppers Early Years Festival, Birr Festival of Music and Voice, Boyne Music Festival,

#### **Medium-large festival discussion:**

Dublin Dance Festival, Clonmel Junction Festival, Carlow Arts Festival, Dublin Fringe Festival, West Cork Music, Age and Opportunity (Bealtaine Festival), Baboro Children's Festival, Galway International Arts Festival, Cork Midsummer Festival, Cairde Arts Festival, Dublin Theatre Festival.