

Mr Colum Boyle
Permanent Secretary
Department for Communities
1-7 Bedford Street
Belfast BT2 7EG

6 October 2023

Dear Mr Boyle

Open Letter from Equity's Northern Ireland Committee

Our arts community, our community of supporters and the community at large delivered a message to the Department for Communities this year when we found out that arts organisations were facing cuts of up to 10% in funding from the Arts Council NI as a result of decisions which you were being required to take in the absence of a sitting Assembly. Over 12,500 individuals signed our petition which asked for more investment in the arts, not less.

Our rally was attended by 250 people. Equity members, Trade unionists, arts organisations, venue CEOs, the Arts Council NI and more joined to send you this message. The consultation response from our members provided you with over 110 direct mail letters telling you how these cuts would affect individuals and communities who experience inequality.

The final Department report has been published this week. We recognise your confirmation that Arts Council NI funding has decreased, in real terms, by 30% over the last decade. Therefore, despite that this year's proposed 10% cut has manifested as a 5% cut, this is no comfort.

We need more investment, not less to enable the sector to provide these valuable contributions and more to Northern Ireland's communities: for social inclusion, enrichment of life quality and local regeneration; for physical and mental health; for enhancing education and learning ability; for the economy; for tourism; for engaging young people and creating confidence and motivation; for skills creation and transferability and increasing employment chances; for Northern Ireland's reputation.

We recognise that the decisions you have been forced to take, without mandate, have been difficult. This should not have been your decision – all of our petitioners ought to have been able to lobby their elected representatives and have a Minister determine the budget. We note that the Department's summary of respondents to the consultation shows that of all the potential sectors represented as having concerns about the impact on cuts to their communities, the Culture, Arts, Heritage and Sports contributions received as many submissions as those concerned about housing. A sitting Minister should be party to this information, however we have none to refer to.

The report states that the Department has sought to minimise the impact on communities by not passing on the full extent of the cut it faces in 2023-24. We ask you: Are we to assume that there will be more cuts in 24-25? How can we as a community have any voice in the decision-making process if there is no elected person who has the desire to listen and the power to act?

This may not be in your power to answer and so, through this open letter, we inviting our MLAs to hear this question and respond with their own answers, including: Who will stand up for the arts and pledge to **reverse the cuts**?

Sincerely,

EQUITY NI COMMITTEE

Stephen Beggs; Stephen Dix; Elaine Duncan; Roisin Gallagher; Holly Hannaway; Marina Hampton; Muire McCallion
Alan McKee; Patsy Montgomery-Hughes