

This research project, commissioned by Dublin City Council's Arts Office and the Arts Council, was carried out in the North Central area of Dublin to find out more about artists, arts and culture organisations and audiences' perceptions, experiences and thoughts around arts provision in their locality. The research was delivered in two parts:

1. A quantitative survey, designed and distributed by Turley.
2. A series of in-person and online focus groups, designed and facilitated by thrive.

As part of the focus groups, we complemented Turley's work and survey, and dived deeper through guided conversations, to understand the perceptions of the Arts within North Central Dublin, and the impact that those perceptions and attitudes have on actual engagement and behaviours.

The topics these conversations covered included:

- General arts engagement pattern- where people engage, who with and how often
- The perception of the arts and the role it plays in people's lives
- Motivations and barriers to arts engagement

In total, we held 13 focus groups between Tuesday 26th April and Monday 30th May 2022, bringing together 51 participants. 7 sessions took place in person, in various venues located in the Dublin North Central area. 6 sessions were held online, via Zoom. Additionally, we gave the option to anyone who had signed up to take part in the focus groups but was not able to attend, of giving written feedback to the questions via SurveyMonkey. This generated 39 responses, bringing the overall number of participants to 90.

What we found during our conversations

General arts engagement pattern

- When asked **what type of arts or culture activities participants engaged with**, most art forms were mentioned. The most mentioned were **theatre, music and visual arts**.
- Respondents often separated attendance and participation – activities they went to and enjoyed in a passive way, and others they were actively involved in. **Art classes and workshops** were often mentioned and covered music, dance, painting, drawing and craft such as knitting, sewing or pottery.
- Other art forms included:
 - Cinema
 - Literature (book clubs, creative writing classes, public readings)
 - Opera
 - Dance (attendance and participation)
 - Comedy
 - Circus

- Museums
- People had different understanding of arts and culture. As such, many activities mentioned would be considered culture rather than arts, such as gardening, food and drink, green events, family activities or chess.
- When asked **where people engaged**, responses varied. The majority said they tended to engage in venues in the city centre and that there was very little on offer in their local area. However, when we looked at the venues they attended, we were able to categorise them based on their location. We found that many are situated in Dublin North Central:
 - The Red Stables
 - The Helix
 - The Viking
 - Sean O’Casey Community Centre Theatre
 - The Shed, Clontarf
 - Axis Ballymun
 - Casino, Marino
 - Artane School of Music
 - Local parks (St Anne’s, Fairview and Rockfield were mentioned several times)
 - Local community centres (Sphere 17 Darndale was mentioned)
 - Local churches
 - Local schools
 - Local libraries
 - Local GAA clubs
- **Who participants engaged with** when attending or participating in arts and culture depended on the type of event they went to. Most said they went **with their partner, friends, or family**. A large number of respondents also said they often went to some events **by themselves**.
- People we interviewed were **frequent attenders**. Most said they engaged **daily, weekly or monthly**.
- Finally, when asked **how they usually find out about activities to do or to attend**, responses were diverse. The majority find out through **word of mouth or social media**. **Facebook** was the number one platform they used for this purpose, especially local community or residents’ association groups. Other resources included:
 - Newspapers (the Irish Times, Sunday Times were mentioned often)
 - Radio (Arena on RTE 1)
 - Online (Google, Journal of Music, Meetup, LovinDublin)

- Newsletters from specific venues
 - Notice boards, flyers or posters in local shops or venues
 - Outdoor advertising
 - Whatsapp groups
 - Going physically to local community centres to ask what's on
 - Two people mentioned the Culture Club by Dublin City Council Culture Company.
- There was a general agreement that a **centralised online platform** that would feature information about all the events and things to do in different parts of the city is needed. Many referred to the Culture Night website as an example of something they would like to see in the future, where one could pick an area and see what's on in this specific area.
 - Some participants said they were subscribed to the Dublin City Council's newsletter, but the majority was not aware it was available.

Motivations and barriers to arts engagement

- Our participants engage with arts and culture on a regular basis for various reasons. Most focused on the **impact** arts and culture has on them and the **benefits** it brings them:
 - An opportunity to connect with others. Those were interested in the social aspect and the shared experience with other like-minded individuals.
 - Learning and experiencing something new that makes them think
 - Curiosity
 - Feeding the soul
 - Wellbeing
 - Happiness and enjoyment
 - Relaxation
- On the other hand, there are many **barriers** to arts engagement in Dublin North Central:
 - The lack of offer, events and venues in the area was the most mentioned.
 - Lack of awareness came second
 - Public transport
 - Pricing
 - Accessibility
 - Confidence
- For artists and people working in arts and culture organisations, there were additional barriers directly linked to their practice:

- Lack of studio space
 - Bureaucracy around funding applications that the majority finds too complicated, not streamlined, in a language they don't necessarily understand. Many also said they're often unaware of funding opportunities.
 - The design of funding that already exists. Some mentioned the desire to see multi-annual funding rather than project-based in order to maintain and nurture relationships between different areas of the city.
- We also asked participants about the things they **liked and disliked in Dublin North Central**. They liked people in the area, the outdoor opportunities and natural beauty (parks, sea front in Clontarf, the coastline), as well as its diversity. Things they disliked included how the area is disconnected within itself and from the rest of the city, the litter, antisocial behaviour, lack of restaurants and things to do, and finally, its bad reputation.

Perception of the arts and the role it plays in people's lives

- We also asked our participants whether **going to arts or culture events make them feel part of the community**. All agreed that arts and culture in general make them feel part of the community. However, they didn't think this was the case in Dublin North Central because of the lack of offer in the area.
- When asked about what arts and culture meant to them, all participants said it had an incredibly important place in their lives. These are some of the things they said:

"They enable to enter into people's minds. It's about engaging, enjoying the experience. It inspires me to do things differently. It entertains me. It makes life more enjoyable."

"It's a real appreciation of someone else's skills. You don't get that often in your daily life."

"The arts has the power to change people and change lives."

"The joy of seeing people who think they have nothing to offer and seeing them changed by the experience of going out in front of an audience."

"People think it's a hobby, but it's more than that. It's everything to me. It's an extension of my personality."

"It's about trying to connect. With cinema, I enjoy going alone but with live music you're connecting with the crowd and the atmosphere that is there. Connection is a big thing for me."

Other relevant comments

- The loss of Richmond Road Studios was mentioned a few times.
- There are many empty buildings that are currently not used and could be used for arts and culture purposes.

- There is a need for someone in Dublin City Council who will link art communities in Dublin North Central.
- Many people spoke fondly of an annual art exhibition that used to be held in Clontarf GAA club. Most said they missed it and enjoyed going there as it was local.
- People link the loss and lack of studio spaces with the lack of art exhibitions in the area – they believe both are interconnected.
- Some mentioned a need for places where you don't have to spend money and where activities are not organised around drinking.