

Policy Review: The Digital Arts Policy (2023–2025) in the Service of the Arts Council of Ireland/An Chomhairle Ealaíon’s *Making Great Art Work* Strategy

Daniel H. Mutibwa

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Corresponding author:

<i>Daniel Mutibwa</i>	<i>H.</i>	<i>University of Nottingham</i>	<i>of</i>	daniel.mutibwa@nottingham.ac.uk	https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4519-1782
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Abstract

The Arts Council of Ireland/An Chomhairle Ealaíon (ACI) launched its first Digital Arts Policy (2023–2025) — abbreviated throughout this review article to DAP — in early November 2023. It did so in the capacity of a national development agency that is increasingly seeking to align its work with national strategic frameworks aimed at contributing to tackling major societal challenges in Ireland and farther afield. DAP is designed to leverage knowledge, skills, and funding to support and sustain evolving digital artistic activity in the arts sector in Ireland and to facilitate opportunities for artists and audiences in the country to engage with the digital arts abroad. DAP has committed to addressing familiar and emergent issues in the Irish arts and cultural sector — with a particular focus on the five ‘pillars’ underpinning ACI’s ‘Making Great Art Work’ (MGAW) Strategy (2016–2025). In doing so, DAP takes a significant step towards making the digital arts not only more inclusive, innovative, collaborative, and widely accessible, but also a cross-disciplinary vehicle for wide-ranging societal value (Arts Council of Ireland, 2023c). This article discusses the broader policy context within which DAP was initiated and developed. It reviews selected key features of each of the five MGAW ‘pillars’ — placing a particular emphasis on the policy actions whose implementation was intended to have taken place at the time of writing this paper during the spring of 2024. Where applicable and appropriate, developments, discourses, and illustrative examples drawn from other national contexts are discussed to situate occurrences in Ireland in an international context. The article concludes by taking stock of what DAP has achieved thus far, what DAP does not cover but ideally should have, and what next steps might look like to ensure effective implementation of the policy actions put forward by DAP.

Keywords: Arts Council of Ireland/An Chomhairle Ealaíon; Making Great Art Work Strategy; digital arts; policy; immersive technologies.

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Introduction

The Arts Council of Ireland/An Chomhairle Ealaíon (ACI) describes itself as ‘the Irish government agency for developing the arts [through] work[ing] in partnership with artists, arts organisations, public policy makers and others to build a central place for the arts in Irish life’ (ACI, n.d.c). Enshrined in the Arts Act 2003¹, ACI’s function is to ‘(1) stimulate public interest in the arts, (2) promote knowledge, appreciation, and practice of the arts, (3) assist in improving standards in the arts, and

(4) advise the Minister [for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media] and other public bodies on the arts' (ACI, n.d.d). ACI notes that it achieves this function by (1) 'providing financial assistance', (2) 'offering advice and information', (3) 'publishing research and information', and (4) partnering with other stakeholders on a range of projects (ACI, n.d.d). In theory, ACI should conduct this work at arm's length from government intervention as part of its statutory duties as a national development agency for the arts in the service of national strategic frameworks (ACI, 2015, p.12–13).

In practice, however, safeguarding the arm's length principle has not always been straightforward owing to an interplay of (1) a lack of joined-up thinking, (2) conflicting ideologies, (3) tensions surrounding strategic policy direction, and (4) power dynamics among other factors (Hadley et al., 2020; Higgins and Donnellan, 2023). Far from being unique to Ireland, this has been echoed in research on arts councils in the UK and elsewhere across the globe (Rushton, 2002; Durrer et al., 2019; Foreman-Wernet, 2020). For better or worse, ACI — like arts councils elsewhere — has had to align its work closely with national policies and strategies to remain relevant and generate greater impact, especially at a time when public spend on the arts, culture, and heritage is dwindling². To Hye-Kyung Lee (2022, p.51), this represents a shift from the position of a 'policy-maker' to that of a 'policy taker' that embraces a 'broadened understanding of culture' to contribute to addressing wider societal challenges.

One manifestation of this is ACI's 'Making Great Art Work Strategy (MGAW) (2016–2025). MGAW is a ten-year development plan for the arts in Ireland which comprises five 'pillars', namely (1) artists, (2) public engagement, (3) investment strategy, (4) spatial and demographic planning, and (5) developing capacity (ACI, 2015). Working closely together, the 'pillars' leverage public funding, capacity building, 'the quality and power of work made by artists and arts organisations in Ireland', and 'the high levels of engagement in the arts by the Irish public' (ACI, 2015, p.6) to support sustainable cultural, economic, environmental, social, and technological development at all levels across the country and beyond (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2017; ACI, 2022a; 2024). In this configuration — and driven by a desire to generate greater impact, ACI uses MGAW and its other work to support key national strategic frameworks. Cases in point include (1) 'Culture 2025/Éire Ildánach: A National Cultural Policy Framework to 2025', (2) 'Creative Ireland', (3) 'Project Ireland 2040: Building Ireland's Future', and (4) 'Global Ireland 2025'. Each of these warrants a brief introduction for useful context.

'Culture 2025/Éire Ildánach' is aimed at facilitating broader engagement with the arts and cultural life of Ireland and using culture to present the country favourably abroad (Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, 2020)³. Built around five themes called (1) Creative Youth, (2) Creative Communities, (3) Creative Health and Wellbeing, (4) Creative Climate Action, and (5) Creative Industries, 'Creative Ireland' (2017–2027) is designed to support pathways and opportunities for people and communities to unlock their creative potential through the exploration of issues on and around identity, community, culture, heritage, and citizenship among others (Creative Ireland, n.d). 'Project Ireland 2040' is set up to deliver new employment opportunities, adequate housing, accessible and high-quality cultural and social amenities, enhanced regional connectivity, and improved environmental sustainability (Government of Ireland/Rialtas na hÉireann, n.d). 'Global Ireland 2025' is presented as 'the most ambitious renewal and expansion of Ireland's international

presence ever undertaken in terms of diplomacy, culture, business, overseas development assistance, tourism and trade' (Department of the Taoiseach, 2023, n.p.).

It is in this wider policy context that ACI launched its first Digital Arts Policy (DAP) in the autumn of 2023: in recognition of the great significance that digital holds generally; and the key role that the digital arts in particular can play in contributing to the effective and timely delivery of the national strategic frameworks briefly introduced above. This is explored in more depth in the following section below. According to ACI (2023a; 2023b), DAP marks the culmination of a lengthy period of consultation with a wide range of stakeholders in the Irish arts sector about their digital needs. Stakeholders comprised individual artists, arts collectives, arts organisations, and educational institutions that create and/or facilitate the creation of artwork and artistic experiences using digital technologies including animation, digital capture, immersive technologies, and virtual production among many others. To delimit the parameters of what ACI understands to encompass the digital arts, DAP helpfully (1) defines what digital artistic activity comprises, (2) sets out how that activity is approached and supported, (3) outlines the context and challenges facing the development of that activity, and (4) specifies how that activity is best evaluated (ACI, 2023a). Far from existing in a vacuum, DAP supports the five MGAW 'pillars' introduced above by facilitating the development of digital knowledge and skills with the ultimate goal of building capacity in the Irish arts sector. By extension, as we have seen above, this is designed to support Ireland's overarching strategic frameworks.

This policy review is structured as follows. It discusses the broader policy background context within which DAP was developed — with a particular focus on the national strategic framework-building undertaken during the years between 2015 and 2018. It then reviews selected key features of each of the five MGAW 'pillars' — foregrounding the policy actions whose implementation was intended to have occurred by the spring of 2024 when this review was conducted. Where applicable and appropriate, developments, discourses, and illustrative examples drawn from other national contexts are discussed to situate occurrences in Ireland in an international context. In conclusion, the article critically reflects on what DAP has achieved to date, what DAP does not cover but ideally should have, and what next steps could look like to ensure that the policy actions set out in DAP's 'Implementation Plan 2023–2025' are enacted effectively and in a timely manner.

The Background Context to the development of the Arts Council of Ireland/An Chomhairle Ealaíon's (ACI) Digital Arts Policy (DAP)

The background context to the development of the Digital Arts Policy (DAP) is as interesting and important as the policy itself. That context has two dimensions — the first, broad, and the second, narrow. The former positions ACI's work in the service of selected national strategic frameworks while the latter focuses on (1) the key development work undertaken in the immediate period leading up to the DAP launch event held in early November 2023, and (2) the related discourses conducted during that event. It is useful to discuss both dimensions in some depth to illuminate the important and wide-ranging activity that built up to the enactment of DAP in its current form.

The Broad Context: ACI's alignment of its work with national strategic frameworks for greater impact

The broad context encompasses a flurry of national strategic policy activity in Ireland that can be traced back to 2015 onwards. Particularly the period between 2015 and 2018 is pivotal because it is during this time that the four key national strategic frameworks namely (1) 'Culture 2025/Éire Ildánach: A National Cultural Policy Framework to 2025', (2) 'Creative Ireland', (3) 'Project Ireland 2040: Building Ireland's Future', and (4) 'Global Ireland 2025' were initiated. In their different ways, these frameworks are designed to enable the people of Ireland to realise their full potential in ways that prepare those people to contribute to making the country more creative, inclusive, economically productive, environmentally friendly, resilient, and influential on the world stage. ACI saw great potential for the arts and culture to support the frameworks — where possible in a leading role (ACI, 2022a; 2023a; 2023b; 2023c; 2024). As such, it is no coincidence that the 'Making Great Art Work Strategy' (MGAW) was published in September 2015 followed by the commencement of DAP development shortly thereafter.

Illustrative of the broad context is the strategic policy framework-building surrounding the development of 'Culture 2025/Éire Ildánach' (hereafter Culture 2025) whose overarching aim is to enhance participation in the creative and cultural life of Ireland and to present Irish culture to the world in the most favourable light possible. Already in mid-2016, the then Joint Committee for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (henceforth the Joint Committee) reiterated the essential role that the arts, culture, and heritage in Ireland played in addressing and helping people to understand the complex challenges of the Twenty First Century. The Joint Committee also noted the value in exploiting the appeal and power of the arts, culture, and heritage to connect with audiences across the world among many other things (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2017).

Drawing on advancements in digital technology and their considerable impact, the Joint Committee observed that digital could be leveraged to drive Culture 2025 much more effectively and quickly by exploiting the potential of the blurred boundaries that emerge when digital technology and creativity intersect. Reference was made to blurred boundaries between art forms, between arts participation and consumption, between artists and audiences, and between production and distribution platforms and tools (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2017, p.18). To the Joint Committee, digital presented Culture 2025 with opportunities to support Ireland's other national strategic frameworks through (1) enabling co-operation on a global scale, (2) creating new relationships and networks, (3) opening up creative possibilities by making creative tools freely available, (4) broadening the diversity of content, (5) facilitating special interest and new forms of expression, (6) building creative partnerships at the intersection of the arts, culture, heritage, and technology, and (7) eliminating time and distance (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2017, p.28).

While emerging evidence concentrated on highlighting the benefits of adopting digital to enhance operational efficiency and broaden the range of channels through which Culture 2025 was harnessed to deliver value widely considered (Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, 2020), the Joint Commission showed alertness to some key, related challenges including (1) the de-professionalisation of artistic practices, (2) the facilitation of copyright infringement on a massive scale, and (3) the widespread lack of digital competencies (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2017, p.28). At a macro level, what the Joint Committee said of digital for Culture 2025 — the same can be said for (1) 'Creative Ireland', (2) 'Project Ireland 2040', and (3) 'Global Ireland 2025'. At a micro level,

that very same commentary can be made of digital for MGAW and virtually the rest of ACI's work. This brings us to the narrow context surrounding the development and launch of DAP.

The Narrow Context: Critical development work and discourses surrounding DAP's launch

As hinted at earlier, DAP development commenced between 2015 and 2018. This was during the time when the exploration of possibilities at the intersection of the arts, culture, heritage, creativity, and technology intensified in Ireland and elsewhere — bringing to the fore how digital could be leveraged to (1) support digital research and development in these areas, (2) develop co-operation among stakeholders working in those areas, (3) facilitate content production using immersive technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR), (4) enhance audience engagement through broadening and diversifying publics as well as deepening interactions with them, (5) experiment with delivery formats including live streaming and video-on-demand, and (6) devise new business models to exploit the affordances offered by digital as technology advanced (Baker and Sicchio, 2017; Houses of the Oireachtas, 2017; ACI, 2023a). Taking digital research and development as an example, it is worth looking at pioneering activity in this space in England at the time for helpful context. In 2016, Arts Council England (ACE) partnered with UK Theatre and the Society of London Theatre (SOLT) to commission research to examine the impact of live-to-digital on theatre (ACE, UK Theatre, and SOLT, 2016; Reidy et al., 2016). In 2017, ACE again commissioned new research to investigate the impact of live-to-digital work on (1) audiences, (2) arts and cultural organisations — including museum and heritage institutions, and (3) artforms ranging from opera and music to dance, the combined arts, and visual arts (MTM, 2018).

Among other things, the research explored the opportunities and barriers that existed for (1) artists and arts organisations when creating live-to-digital programming — either autonomously or collaboratively, and (2) national and international audiences engaging with that live-to-digital programming — and what their motivations and experiences were. The research reinforced many of the benefits that the opportunities discussed above offered. It also flagged up some recurring barriers: (1) the cost of digital equipment, (2) a lack of digital skills and associated training, (3) inaccessibility of advice and information, (4) the scarcity and/or unavailability of collaborative opportunities, and (5) poor internet connectivity (ACE, UK Theatre, and SOLT, 2016; Reidy et al., 2016; MTM, 2018). There is evidence to suggest that ACI was following research developments in this space in England and farther afield and incorporating the learning gained into its thinking and approach to digital. Indeed, in its MGAW's Three-Year Plan (2017–2019) published in 2016 — ACI drew, in part, on international research to commit to three key goals among others. First, to increase investment in digital to build capacity. Second, to support artists and arts organisations in Ireland to (1) increase the international dimension of their practice, (2) embed international benchmarks in that practice, and (3) collaborate with international audiences and partners from 2018 onwards (ACI, 2016, p.4–5). Third, to '[c]ontinue on an annual basis regular direct dialogue with artists, organisations and broader stakeholders across government and civic society to understand better the context [they] work in and the external influences affecting the arts' (ACI, 2016, p.13).

'Regular direct dialogue' with stakeholders appears to have been an important and consistent part of ACI's modus operandi since 2018. DAP was launched at a new festival of art and technology called the Beta Festival (Beta Festival, 2023). The launch event featured a panel discussion entitled 'Perspectives from Art and Tech Collectives' (ACI, 2023b) which captured a range of takes on what

panellists saw as opportunities and potential challenges for DAP. The fact that panellists were drawn from around Ireland, and represented multidisciplinary digital arts, is significant. As we will see shortly below, it suggests that ACI is dedicated to shaping the digital arts in Ireland and beyond in a truly inclusive, accountable, transparent, and responsive way. The largely anecdotal evidence provided by the panellists appeared to support this. All in all, DAP's ambition is not only to 'facilitate innovation, encourage cross-disciplinary collaborations, and ensure that the digital arts are a vehicle for cultural preservation and expression', but also deliver on the named objectives 'through grants, partnerships, and advocacy efforts in collaboration with key stakeholders in the digital arts community' (ACI, 2023c, n.p.). Whether or not these ambitions are being realised is naturally a matter of scholarly curiosity. Because it is still relatively early to assess any progress made at this stage in any great depth, this review will focus attention on the policy actions whose implementation was intended to have happened at the time of writing this article during the spring of 2024. To situate developments in the Irish arts and cultural sector in a broader context, relevant and potentially inspirational strategic practice, illustrative examples, perspectives, and trends drawn from other national contexts will be discussed where deemed appropriate.

At DAP's launch event, ACI Member — Brian Lavery — recounted that nearly one thousand artists, arts organisations, and other stakeholders were surveyed about their digital needs. Numerous in-depth interviews were conducted also. Several critical insights were gathered that surfaced both familiar and new challenges faced by the Irish arts sector: (1) a chronic lack of digital expertise and technical skills, (2) the high cost of accessing technical equipment, digital software, and associated competencies, (3) stiff competition posed by other digital offerings, especially streaming and on-demand video/TV services, (4) barriers to digital access for some artists and audiences, and (5) a general lack of understanding of digital needs and the capacity to respond to them adequately demonstrated by some support organisations — including ACI itself (ACI, 2023a). These challenges are not unique to Ireland as we have already seen above. Other national contexts in the UK, Europe and elsewhere have also grappled with them — including the broader question of how to define digital arts activity in the first place (Australia Council for the Arts, 2021; Hylland, 2022; Nuccio and Bertacchini, 2022). Survey and interview responses crucially shaped and informed how ACI came to understand and define the digital arts in DAP along three main features, namely (1) content, (2) tools, and (3) distribution. The content of the digital arts can draw directly on digital technology and culture for their subject matter. Artworks driven by data — data which are themselves created by software of various kinds — are cases in point. The arts utilise digital as a tool for achieving their aesthetic purposes through different forms of presentation. The distribution of the digital arts is enabled via a range of platforms and devices.

Having been among the survey respondents and interviewees — and as hinted at above, the panellists at DAP's launch event praised ACI for its considerable efforts in engaging in wide consultation with different stakeholders. The panellists also showed great appreciation for ACI's approach to DAP development that was widely seen to have been inclusive, accountable, transparent, and highly responsive. There was mention of how ACI won hearts and minds during the development phase of DAP by being candid and honest about what was known and what was not, and what was achievable and realistic, and what was not. Taking preservation as an example in light of the increasing obsolescence of many emerging digital technologies — especially those that are free, open-source, and non-proprietary, it is not known how digital arts artefacts can be best

conserved, and at what scale. Additionally, the panellists lauded ACI for promoting networking amongst stakeholders in the Irish digital arts sector across the country and for keeping the sector abreast of progress during DAP development. Brian Lavery was helpfully clear about what DAP is intended to achieve, and what it is not designed to do. For instance, where digital arts policies elsewhere offer advice and guidance on matters that range from Information Technology (IT) to marketing and promotion to developing new income streams and/or business models to preservation and archiving (ACE, 2015; MTM and The Space, 2016; Australia Council for the Arts, 2021), DAP does not do that. Brian Lavery also reported that several policy actions had been implemented incrementally behind the scenes during the DAP development phase dating back to 2018 — including the immediate period leading up to the DAP launch event in early November 2023. In what follows, we look at what DAP aims to achieve.

The Digital Arts Policy (DAP) and its ‘Implementation Plan 2023-2025’

The Digital Arts Policy (DAP) is designed to support the five key ‘pillars’ of the ‘Make Great Art Work’ (MGAW) Strategy which was published by ACI in 2015 as a ten-year development plan for the arts in Ireland until 2025. In DAP (ACI, 2023a), the ‘pillars’ are listed as (1) the artist, (2) developing capacity, (3) public engagement, (4) spatial and demographic planning, and (5) investment strategy⁴. DAP is split into two sections. The first section presents generic descriptions of each of the named ‘pillars’ on pages 8–12. The second section lists the same ‘pillars’ again in tabular form in the ‘Implementation Plan 2023-2025’ on pages 16–29. The ‘Plan’ is organised around this overarching structure: (1) policy action, (2) desired outcomes, (3) deliverables/key performance indicators (KPIs), and (4) timeline. The following subsections briefly review selected key features of each of the ‘pillars’ — placing a particular focus on the policy actions whose implementation was intended to have taken place at the time of writing this review article during the spring of 2024. It is worth noting that although the ‘pillar’ titled ‘spatial and demographic planning’ is briefly described in the first section of the policy on page 11, it is not listed in the ‘Plan’ in the second section. It appears this omission would warrant an explanation, but none whatsoever is given.

The artist

Artists are seen to (1) inspire and reflect the rhythm of the everyday, (2) illuminate the momentous events in public life in creative — and sometimes refreshingly different — ways, and (3) nourish our understandings of the past (ACI, 2015). Increasingly, latest technologies are lending themselves well to supporting these endeavours. As an instrument, DAP is designed to ensure that artists acquire the knowledge, skills, and funding needed not only to interrogate emerging technologies (particularly digital technologies which are the focus of this review article), but also the changing relationship between humans and those technologies. The latter point is vitally important considering that the human-machine interaction engendered by the said relationship has iteratively and significantly shaped the arts in terms of facilitating new formats and ways of depicting the world — including engagement with the place that humans hold in it (National Endowment for the Arts, 2012; Baker and Sicchio, 2017). To capture these new formats and ways effectively and meaningfully — including taking account of the fact that artists typically transcend art forms and adopt associated hybrid practices which may or may not involve working in partnership, DAP champions flexibility in funding in support of what it refers to as ‘digital artistic practice’ (ACI, 2023a, p.8). In DAP’s formulation,

flexibility positions such practice to benefit from opportunities offered not only by multidisciplinary art forms, but also for international collaboration and related funding support.

From the third quarter of 2023 onwards, a key policy action was to (1) undertake a deep dive into ACI's funded digital artistic activity, (2) gain a strong understanding of that activity, and (3) measure performance through analysis of applications from artists and arts organisations to identify digital artistic activity across all art forms funded by ACI. At the time of writing, ACI lists six past and ongoing projects and programmes on its website that were funded during the COVID-19 pandemic (ACI, n.d.a), and which could potentially serve as benchmarks for what effective and impactful digital artistic activity could look like. First, a national archive and resource centre for Irish traditional music that used digital to connect artists and the public remotely to their material culture. Second, a programme of theatrical entertainment that is being made accessible via streaming and on-demand channels to national and international viewers from a variety of different demographics and socio-economic backgrounds. Third, a project that is utilising digital to enhance the experience of learning, playing, and sharing classical music much more widely. Fourth, a music programme that is making use of digital to create an online youth orchestra and facilitate the development of associated digital and technical skills. Fifth, a programme of training that exploited digital to empower children and young people to express their lived experiences on their own terms as well as to learn and engage in social interaction remotely. And lastly, a gallery that harnessed digital to develop online programming that raised the profiles of associate artists nationally and internationally and connected with new and diverse audiences in creative and meaningful ways. No other recent projects capturing digital artistic activity funded by ACI are listed on the latter's website yet as of late May 2024.

A further policy action for the fourth quarter of 2023 was to conduct research on and around the development and funding of digital artistic activity across Europe and beyond. This includes mapping related funding opportunities, publishing a list of them on the digital section of ACI's website, and proactively promoting them across the wider Irish arts sector. The motivation behind this is two-fold. First, to enable ACI to learn from best practice models of funding for digital artistic activity in Europe and elsewhere. Second, to encourage artists in Ireland to take advantage of European and pan-European programmes for funding and collaboration. At the time of writing in late May 2024, the 'digital arts' section of the ACI website lists neither European nor pan-European programmes for funding and collaboration. A related policy action advocates appropriate and fair remuneration for digital artwork in alignment with the recently revised 'Paying the Artist' policy for the period 2024—2025 (ACI, 2024). This is significant in the context of the historical, perennial, and often conflicting positions taken by successive Irish governments both in the past and present. For an exploration of these positions, see Barton et al. (2023). To deliver the policy actions discussed thus far and the broader objectives of DAP, yet another policy action was to recruit (1) a Programme Delivery Manager in the first quarter of 2023, and (2) a digital assessor in the second quarter of 2024. The former is in post at the time of writing. Recruitment of the latter is ongoing — as of late May 2024.

Developing capacity

DAP is designed to develop capacity in the wider Irish arts sector by helping to (1) build an understanding of the current professional development landscape in the digital arts, (2) identify the key skills that the arts sector requires, and (3) enable collaboration on and around the development of bespoke training and capacity-building programmes. The stakeholders surveyed and interviewed

during DAP development identified mentorship and residency programmes as critical to developing capacity across the sector in a sustainable way. Actors in the cultural and creative industries and education realms were considered best placed to deliver the said programmes — if working in partnership. During the fourth quarter of 2023, one policy action was to promote ACI's Digital Toolbox (Culture Works, 2021) to coincide with the DAP launch event. Indeed, artists and arts organisations at the launch event were reminded of the resources in the Digital Toolbox that can help them to develop digital artistic work. To gain a strong understanding of the current professional development landscape in the digital arts space, ACI set out a policy action to conduct an audit of all existing digital and technical training courses for the arts that are available in Ireland. The next step was to consult with educational bodies and partner organisations to assemble a compendium of digital arts courses. At the time of writing in late May 2024, it is unclear whether (1) partner organisations (if any) have been approached to develop a mentorship structure to support the transfer of digital and technical skills, and (2) the said compendium has been created and exists separately, and if so, where it can be accessed.

A closer study of ACI's website shows that digital arts courses can be accessed through Qualifax — Ireland's national learners' database comprising approximately 15,000 training and upskilling courses offered by various providers. The courses are searchable by type, provider, mode of attendance (such as online, evening, or morning sessions), and geographical location. Using DAP as a lever, ACI crafted a further policy action to identify, evaluate, and approach potential partners about providing professional development programmes in digital — including designing bespoke support for artists with disabilities and leveraging digital to open up potential new ways of training and working. When they materialise, the new digital professional development programmes will complement the existing 'Cultural and Creative Skillnet' scheme which designs, develops, and delivers responsive, bespoke, and flexible talent development programmes in animation, immersive technologies, and virtual production among others (Cultural and Creative Industries Skillnet, 2024). A related policy action was to initiate partnerships that provide digital arts residencies from the first quarter of 2024 onwards. A list of existing digital arts residencies was to be compiled — including the ACI and Dublin City University's (DCU) Artist in Residence in Technology and Innovation programme (Arts Council of Ireland, 2020; DCU Arts and Culture, n.d.). Neither ACI's website nor DCU's lists information on current digital arts residencies as of late May 2024. The last such residency dates back to 2020. A central policy action committed to exploring the possibility of digital capacity grants to support the work of artists and arts organisations from the fourth quarter of 2023 onwards. A related, two-fold action point was to (1) conduct research into European funding models for grants for digital assistants and digital arts workers, and (2) provide a pathway into paid work for students trained in digital artistic activity.

No details on progress exist as of May 2024 — meaning it is hard to paint a picture of what is unfolding, and where developments are headed. That said, it does seem worth looking at what other comparable digital capacity-building programmes elsewhere have done and achieved, and how these may inform ACI's own digital capacity grants programme. In late December 2023, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (2023a) announced its programme called the 'National Lottery Individual Artists Digital Evolution Awards' to support eight individual artists from Northern Ireland in the creation of high-quality arts projects using innovative digital technologies. Part funded by The National Lottery and Future Screens Northern Ireland, the programme offered the artists grants of

up to £10,000 each. Some of the artists are making digital art for the first time but all of them are working with digital or immersive technologies in novel and innovative ways. For instance, one project is using an augmented reality (AR) game to invite children's imagination into the real world of grown-ups. The goal is to give adults the opportunity to tune into the imaginations of children and the worlds they create. Another project is using immersive technologies to create new digital objects that can be incorporated into projection and live display for theatre. In Scotland and England, the Scottish Government (2021) and ACE (The Space, 2024) have supported artists and arts organisations in similar ways respectively to create art using digital and immersive technologies and to develop associated competencies and skills in using those technologies. This clearly aligns with the way in which DAP is looking to build capacity in the Irish arts sector.

Public engagement

DAP is championing the use of opportunities posed by digital to increase arts engagement with communities and diverse publics both at home and abroad. DAP views this as a means to contribute to the reduction of the digital divide in alignment with ACI's Equality, Human Rights, and Diversity Policy (ACI, n.d.b). DAP seeks to achieve this by supporting research into national and international case studies that have demonstrably shown how digital has improved access to the arts and related engagement — including participation in the arts by audiences (1) comprising older demographics, (2) experiencing disabilities, and (3) living and working in rural areas. To counter the stiff competition posed by streaming and on-demand services, DAP is designed to raise the Irish public's awareness of, and access to, Irish digital artistic activity in Ireland and further afield. To this end, a policy action during the fourth quarter of 2023 has been to create online content. Some content is indeed readily accessible under the 'Digital Arts' section of the ACI website — featuring among other things (1) selected profiles of artists and arts organisations working with digital in various capacities, (2) the Digital Toolbox mentioned earlier, (3) a national scoping exercise capturing the geographical spread of ACI-funded digital arts projects, and (4) case studies of projects encompassing digital artistic activity. The next step is to recruit 'a digital arts narrator' to work with ACI-funded digital artists and arts organisations to promote their work from an early stage, thereby putting them on the map.

A further policy action from the second quarter of 2024 onwards is to assess access to, and demand for, digital arts activity among Irish audiences to gain a better understanding of those audiences' needs. There are useful lessons to learn from experiences of public engagement in digital elsewhere. In their interesting discussion of how artists and cultural organisations are exploring new ways to engage audiences online in England, Chianta and White (2023) offer some timely examples. One such example is the Victoria and Albert (V&A) Museum website called *mused: creatively curious* which is using a trend-spotter panel and Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) analysis to inform relevant content for its target audience of 10-14-year-olds. Another example is Birmingham Royal Ballet's *Virtual Stage* which is exploring the different ways immersive technologies can be incorporated into the organisation's productions to enhance experiences and interactions with, and increase access to, diverse audiences nationally and internationally (Birmingham Royal Ballet, 2024). Recent scholarly work in this space advocates maintenance of a relatively high level of digital and hybrid programming to offset the familiar and pervasive barriers to arts and cultural engagement — including disabilities, immobility, limited time, and cost (Mihelj et al., 2019; Mackey, 2021; Wright and Gray, 2022).

And although the COVID-19 pandemic showcased the important gains that were made in harnessing digital for public engagement, commentators are increasingly observing a return to in-person experiences (Chianta and White, 2023). Richard Misek and co-authors (2022, p.9), for instance, attribute this reversal to what the arts and cultural sector broadly perceives as ‘low revenue, limited funding, a public funding structure that favours one-off projects, the absence of a digital rights framework, and uncertainty about what content works best’. Other research points to a pattern whereby some members of the public feel and think it is inappropriate to pay for arts and cultural content and experiences online (Bakhshi and Throsby, 2012). Among other things, this has serious implications for the remuneration of artists discussed earlier and the generation of income for arts organisations. Notwithstanding, Misek et al. (2022, p.9) argue that placing the focus back on hybrid programming should be the future because ‘the more routes that exist for engaging with arts and culture, the easier it is to engage with, and the more inclusive it can become’. This can be seen as public engagement at its best. It would be in DAP’s greatest interests to embed this key insight into its action points on and around public engagement in digital going forward.

Spatial and demographic planning

As noted earlier, DAP provides a generic description of this ‘pillar’ in the first section of the policy on page 11. However, the ‘pillar’ is omitted in the ‘Implementation Plan’ in the second section of the policy — along with associated policy actions, desired outcomes, deliverables/KPIs, and timeline. No reasons for this omission are provided as of May 2024 but the following observation may offer some helpful context. In collaboration with Julie’s Bicycle EU in 2022, ACI undertook public consultation with artists, arts organisations, arts workers, and wider stakeholders to inform the development of its Climate Action and Environmental Policy (ACI, 2022a). The Climate Action and Environmental Policy (CAEP) was scheduled for publication in early 2023 but it does not appear among the publications and policy papers listed and made accessible on ACI’s website as of May 2024. If published, the understanding is that CAEP will outline the policy recommendations that ACI will enact to support the arts, culture, and heritage to respond effectively and meaningfully to the climate and environmental crisis facing humanity. DAP has committed to embracing ‘those recommendations relating to digital which may come out of CAEP (ACI, 2023a, p.11). Furthermore, DAP has signalled strategic alignment with the Spatial Policy framework which champions several key policy actions. Cases in point include (1) ensuring a fair distribution of ACI investment in the arts until 2025 and beyond, (2) identifying the key planning policy and growth areas where the arts have a significant role to play, (3) supporting the rollout of broadband nationally, and (4) mitigating the environmental impact of digital activities (ACI, 2022b; 2022c; 2023a).

DAP is designed to facilitate implementation of some of these actions as follows. In support of wide-ranging efforts to increase public engagement with the arts — particularly the digital arts, DAP is seeking to leverage existing arts infrastructure in places and regions to play a leading role. This makes sense considering that such infrastructure is familiar to communities and publics that use it — many doing so as part of their everyday routine. DAP recognises that enhancing public engagement with the digital arts requires serious consideration of potential barriers such as poor internet connection and latency among many others. In addition to supporting the rollout of broadband nationally as mentioned above, a crucial action point acknowledges the significance of developing suitable archival systems to preserve artefacts generated by the digital arts adequately

and sustainably. Mention of sustainability here brings into sharp focus important issues on and around the environmental impact of digital activities. Noted specifically are (1) '[t]he risk of equipment ending up in landfills', and (2) '[t]he carbon footprint generated through data transmission, streaming content and hosting data in data centres' (ACI, 2023a, p.11). Rather than go it alone as it were, DAP indicates — as we have seen above — that it will coordinate any actions it proposes with existing guidance and strategic frameworks (for instance, the Spatial Policy; International Arts Policy; and Project Ireland 2040) and new, relevant policy directives currently under development (for example, CAEP).

Investment strategy

DAP recognises that digital activities can be expensive and volatile. As briefly touched upon above, digital is characterised by relatively high costs of equipment — equipment that is susceptible to obsolescence. DAP calls for a flexible approach to (1) responding to changing technology and evolving needs, (2) working towards continually understanding those needs, (3) ensuring that existing funding structures are revised to allow for responsiveness, and (4) advocating for capital investment which at present is not within the remit of ACI. From the third quarter of 2023, policy action is aimed at conducting research into (1) identifying the equipment needed to support digital artistic activity, (2) mapping existing and potential models for the provision of digital artistic equipment to the arts sector, (3) understanding previous and existing equipment provision schemes in Ireland and Europe, including equipment rental schemes, and (4) assessing the risk associated with the maintenance, operation, depreciation, and redundancy of equipment. At the time of writing in late May 2024, no information relating to the findings of this research exists on the ACI website. It is reasonable to assume that this work is ongoing. During the DAP launch event, panellists spoke about devising mechanisms for sharing costs of technology through collaboration — including co-sharing equipment. How exactly this would work could be determined through experimentation in the first instance.

At the time of writing, a key goal is to compile a list of potential partners to provide access to capital equipment. One driving force behind this is experimental collaboration amongst various, existing actors within the Irish arts ecology and other cross-sectoral support organisations. Following precedent elsewhere — and considering the very limited funding available, a willingness to take some risks could benefit the Irish arts sector. For example, Hasan Bakhshi and David Throsby have drawn on key theoretical and empirical perspectives to argue that arts and cultural organisations could take risks when rethinking their business models and developing associated investment strategies by adopting innovative debt and equity instruments, including patient loans, quasi-equity, and venture philanthropy among others (2012, p.212). However, achieving success here would be contingent on possessing the requisite financial expertise to manage the said instruments. Be that as it may, any learning to be gained from experimenting with the specified instruments would benefit the Irish arts sector. In their interesting discussion of how digital capture made the performance *Peaky Blinders: The Redemption of Thomas Shelby* by Rambert Production in England so successful across theatre and screen formats, Fiona Morris and Sarah Butcher (2024) highlighted, among other things, investment and support by The Space (ACE), the BBC, the Birmingham Hippodrome, The Lowry, and access to UK cinema tax credit allowance. Might a similar experimental co-production approach be worth exploring in the Irish (digital) arts context? The authors celebrate

Peaky Blinders as ‘a shining example of digital capture’ (Morris and Butcher, 2024, p. n.p.). One wonders whether the process of experimental co-production behind the performance could be leveraged to shape a shining model for how digital artistic equipment could be accessed, operated, maintained, and possibly recycled in ways that are fair, inclusive, sustainable, and environmentally friendly.

Towards re-crafting and operating the ACI Digital Arts Policy (DAP) as a flexible and responsive ‘Living Resource’

Placing a particular focus on MGAW, we have seen that ACI presents DAP as a policy instrument that aims to facilitate wider engagement with digital artistic activities (widely considered) in Ireland and elsewhere alike. Over and above supporting MGAW, DAP is aimed at leveraging existing capacity, competencies and skills, policy directives, and resources to support the successful delivery of Ireland’s key national strategic frameworks using digital in creative and innovative ways. Evidence drawn upon in this article suggests that ACI has understood the huge potential that digital holds in unlocking opportunities not only for artists, arts organisations, and other constituencies and institutions with a stake in the arts, cultural, and heritage ecosystems, but also for public life in Ireland as a whole. In seeking to achieve greater impact and drawing on genuine collaboration stretching over many years, ACI has shown a commitment to develop DAP as a policy lever that shapes (1) understandings and developments at the intersection of creativity, innovation, and digital, and (2) the contours of the resultant human-machine interaction alluded to earlier. For instance, DAP aims to (1) develop a shared understanding of what comprises digital artistic activity, (2) shape what appropriate training in the digital arts might look like, (3) build mechanisms for remunerating digital artistic work equitably and fairly, (4) support the development of inclusive approaches to evaluating meaningful digital artistic and cultural experiences, and (5) embrace good-practice and sustainable models for (a) funding to support digital arts/cultural research and associated innovation, and (b) effective collaboration.

It is striking that DAP is not merely designed to operate in a national Irish silo. ACI appears to understand the European and global context of its work. In doing so, it demonstrates strategic alignment among different but related policy frameworks to avert the risk of duplication and enhance efficacy. A case in point is the strategic alignment between DAP and the International Arts Policy (ACI, 2022c). ACI is also monitoring and situating its (digital) work in key programmes such as Creative Europe⁵, the European Green Deal⁶, and New European Bauhaus⁷. Globally, ACI is enlisting the support of ‘Culture Ireland’ and the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) to promote Irish arts and culture worldwide and to raise awareness of Ireland overseas (ACI, 2022c, p.3) — in the same way that ‘Global Ireland 2025’ does. Using DAP as a policy tool, ACI is looking to embed digital in the pursuit of these endeavours and other work. However, not all appears to have gone according to plan — as is sometimes the case in the public policy world. DAP established base lines for policy actions, delivery of desired outcomes, KPIs, and timelines but far fewer deliverables have been achieved by late May 2024 than planned. Without those deliverables, capturing any rich learning gained and good-practice models developed effectively and methodically makes it difficult to evaluate KPIs. At a time when ACI is leading what can be viewed as a ‘culture change’ in the Irish

(digital) arts sector, the impossibility of assessing KPIs at this truly momentous time may feel like a missed opportunity.

Persisting deficits in digital skills and competencies can be said to continue to hinder wider digital arts adoption, creation, consumption, and even innovation. As noted earlier, there are aspects that DAP was not designed to do but ideally should have. Understandably, DAP cannot be everything to everyone within its relatively short life cycle since 3rd November 2023. However — just like the digital arts/cultural policies mentioned earlier have done, DAP could at least signpost stakeholders seeking advice, information, and knowledge to resources holding material that responds to frequently asked questions. In addition to the rich and comprehensive advice and information already hosted on ACI's website, DAP could point stakeholders in the direction of good-practice resources on and around: (1) copyright, (2) IP, (3) digital capture, (4) archiving and preservation, (5) business models, (6) audience development, (7) usability and accessibility, and (8) effective use of digital data.

This last point naturally prompts some discussion on and around Artificial Intelligence (AI), something DAP would reasonably have been expected to engage with in more detail. Currently, DAP offers a mere mention of how the AI Act, which came into effect on 1 August 2024 (European Commission, 2024), might impact artistic work. AI is widely perceived to complement human input in superior ways — increasingly even replacing the need for that input altogether drawing on the human-machine interaction alluded to earlier. AI is already transforming the arts through (1) the generation of new forms of literary writing, (2) the composition of music; and (3) the production of paintings and other audiovisual content among many others (Baker and Sicchio, 2017; Hageback and Hedblom, 2022). These are already significant developments — some of which may not have occurred at the time DAP was launched in November 2023 but warrant serious consideration and ongoing discussion, nonetheless. With AI's impact said to become far greater sooner rather than later, this can mean only one thing for DAP — if it is to remain meaningful and relevant. As developments continue to occur at a fast pace — and considering that public policy processes tend to lag behind latest phenomena, ACI could consider updating DAP at regular intervals. This could involve adjusting policy provisions as needed and allowing these to come into effect gradually. The same could be done for the implementation of policy actions. This approach would be akin to operating DAP as a 'living resource' — one that (1) changes to meet the evolving needs of its stakeholders, and (2) guides the delivery of effective and meaningful policy outcomes particularly during these constantly evolving times.

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Endnotes

- ¹ For more information about this Act which was enacted by the Houses of the Oireachtas, please access the Irish Statute Book via this link: <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2003/act/24/enacted/en/html> [Accessed July 2024].
- ² In England, for example, it was announced during the spring of 2024 that Arts Council England was scheduled to undergo a ‘microscopic’ government review to ascertain how it could make further significant savings (Harris, 2024). The review was postponed due to the 4th July 2024 General Election. It is unclear if, and when, the review will go ahead. In Northern Ireland, Arts Council of Northern Ireland (2023b) has found itself in a similar position in the past and present. Both examples highlight the contradictions and tensions surrounding the operationalisation of the arm’s length principle.
- ³ At the time this document was published in January 2020, the authoring Department was called ‘Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht’. It was renamed ‘Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media’ in September of that year.
- ⁴ In the MGAW Strategy (ACI, 2015), the five pillars are listed in the following order: (1) the artist, (2) public engagement, (3) investment strategy, (4) spatial and demographic planning, and (5) developing capacity. Clearly, there is a discrepancy in the way the pillars are listed in both resources. Whether or not this is significant appears to warrant an explanation either way — but none is offered.
- ⁵ Creative Europe is a funding programme established by the European Union in 2014 to support the cultural, creative, and audiovisual sectors across Europe. More information can be accessed here: <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/creative-europe> [Accessed July 2024].
- ⁶ Approved in 2020 by the European Commission as a set of policy initiatives, this programme aims to make the European Union the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. For more details:

https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en
[Accessed July 2024].

7. Characterised by a strong public participatory ethos, this EU policy and funding initiative was launched by the European Commission in 2021 to promote the reimagination of sustainable living in Europe and beyond. More information is available here: https://new-european-bauhaus.europa.eu/index_en [Accessed July 2024].