

Statement by
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To the Cult-CreaTE project final conference, Cesis (Latvia), 24 May 2022.

“Cork has always been an outward-looking city, which, through our proud maritime history and the links this has forged, has engaged with and learned from the wider world. It is also a place where culture and creativity have long been recognised among the city’s most important assets. As a European Capital of Culture, we hold these characteristics as being central to what we are about as a city. Our cultural offering is a key attraction in embracing those choosing to make this growing city their home, but is equally significant in presenting Cork as an immersive visitor experience by conveying a real and welcoming sense of the place and of its people. This cultural identity plays into the city’s future ambition, with Cork City Council continually working to enhance and improve the cultural experience of both domestic and international tourists as well as of our own citizens, of course.

‘Culture’ is often thought of as a somewhat intangible concept. Yet for Cork, the elements behind it, from the obvious – our heritage sites, available as living places to experience the city’s past, or our renowned year-round calendar of festivals where the city presents its contemporary cultural face to locals and ‘temporary locals’ alike – to more discreet activities taking place in studios and workshops, are very real indeed. They are shaped, produced and animated – with support from Cork City Council and other agencies – by actors across this sector under the broad definition of Cultural & Creative Industries (CCI’s).

The most important cohort among these are the micro-firms and individual artists and artisans whose work embodies so much of Cork’s identity, adding richly to the uniqueness of our city – a quality which, we appreciate, is increasingly sought after by the discerning tourist.

These makers and creators ply their trade as a labour of love in the first instance. This is a difficult balancing act which brings with it very particular characteristics and needs – something that can easily get overlooked to the point that small-scale creatives can sometimes be dismissed as being more enthusiasts or hobbyists than businesses. But they are very much businesses who need to balance their genius and flair with the bottom line of turning a profit in order to survive, let alone prosper. And as a sector, CCI’s also represent more than the sum of their parts in terms of their actual, and potential, contribution to our city’s economic, as well as general, vibrancy. This is also an audience that has been especially hard hit by the disruption of the pandemic and requires assistance in reinforcing its long-term competitiveness.

This is where this project stepped in for Cork in responsively meeting a grassroots demand for something that did not yet exist. Something which could be used to enhance the profile, the recognition, the coherence and the influence for the sector locally.

As local authority, we endeavour to provide enabling policies and support for culture and creativity as we equally do in relation to tourism development. Accordingly, as normality slowly returned post-COVID, in seeking to develop workable synergies between these two distinct policy fields, to enable local CCI's to develop a greater focus on exploiting tourism opportunities and markets, our focus was placed on co-developing and deploying a new clustering arrangement under the STAMP brand.

Already that is showing promising signs, if the excitement generated by our recent pop-up festival across our city centre is any indicator. However, the spotlight of a large public event such as this – even if it proves only the first of many, as we hope – is just one very early and very visible local output from this project. Longer-term, there is more to this than may meet the eye.

In our native language – Gaeilge – we have a popular saying: *Tús maith, leath na hoibre*. It means that making a good start represents half the work in delivering on an objective. In opening our eyes – Cult-CreaTE has afforded us an opportunity for just such a fresh start. As is appropriate to a project on creativity, it has provided some inspiration from further afield – notably from Dundee and from Nicosia. But the spark it has ignited represents only the beginning of a longer journey of continued mobilisation with shared purpose among Cork's creative actors to build on what's been achieved of late in working more cohesively together than ever before.

That is something we will now look to embark on locally. As you learned this morning, the motto of STAMP is "*Creativity empowering Cork...Cork empowering creativity*". There is a built-in symbiosis there – a circularity –between we, as the local authority on behalf of the city, and the creative stakeholders as beneficiaries of this project. In that spirit of empowerment, the next steps will be largely up to our stakeholders themselves to press ahead with their new-found momentum, and to formalise their new arrangement, perhaps as a network or similar structure.

In doing so, they will not be abandoned. Just as has been the case under Cult-CreaTE, I am confident that they will continue to have the active engagement and support of Cork City Council in progressing their next steps – and perhaps of other public agencies also, such as the national *Creative Ireland* programme which came on board to support the action plan delivery.

This is because we have used the project to more broadly consider the place of the cultural and creative sector in our city's economy and development – including by reference to tourism. In doing so we have been successful in influencing more than just our cultural policy, as was the principal target in the form of our future Arts & Culture Strategy. Crucially, Cult-CreaTE has also begun to leave its fingerprints on how the city will physically accommodate culture and creativity over the coming years by shaping the direction of both our City Centre Revitalisation Action Plan – a response to the need to emphasise activity and attractions in

bringing people back to the city centre post-pandemic – and our forthcoming City Development Plan.

Admittedly, this policy work is not easily illustrated as actions at this point but as the project evolved, it became clear that it was that bigger, long-term picture – that dream of having an accessible city centre place of their own in which to welcome “culturally curious” visitors, and of having a high-profile showcase to exhibit their wares – that engaged Benchspace, Cork Craft & Design, Sample Studios and Shandon Art Studios in this project and the concept of cultural and creative tourism in the first place. In terms of impact and legacy, this is more than we could have hoped for originally from this project.

Delivering something of that scale is obviously not the sort of thing that an Interreg Europe project can hope to achieve immediately as an action, but I like to think that when that facility comes about in the coming years, this project will represent the bedrock of its foundation. Not just a shop window but a chance for creative thinking, artistic collaboration and inspiration to take a real step forward in assertively making its mark – putting its STAMP - on Cork’s future development.

Ladies and gentlemen, the philosopher and author Edward de Bono – the originator of the term ‘lateral thinking’ – once said that *“Creativity involves breaking out of expected patterns in order to look at things in a different way.”* We did precisely that in Cork in getting to where we got to with this project. It was not a straightforward or linear process – it went through various iterations before we hit on a winning formula that worked for all our stakeholders. I think this ties in with the idea that ‘culture’ is not simply about reflecting on who we are and where we’ve been, but also about where we hope to go. Which is as good a tie in with tourism as I can offer you, on the basis that, as JRR Tolkien said *“Not all of those who wander are lost”*.

Thank you.