

# Arts for a Flourishing Carlow



CARLOW STRATEGIC ARTS PLAN

2025-2035

# FOREWORD

## by Cathaoirleach/ Chief Executive



Carlow County Council is pleased to present Arts for a Flourishing Carlow, the third Strategic Arts Plan developed by the Council's Arts Office. This ten-year plan sets out a clear framework to support the growth, accessibility, and sustainability of the arts across County Carlow.

The writing of this plan followed a period of reflection and analysis, both locally and nationally, particularly in response to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the evolving demographic, social, and economic landscape. It responds to the need for a proactive and adaptive approach to arts development in a changing political, environmental, technological, and cultural context.

Significant growth within the arts and creative sectors in Carlow has been supported by sustained investment by Carlow County Council, the Arts Council of Ireland, and programmes such as Creative Ireland. The Arts Office continues to build on its longstanding commitment to collaborative practice, which has played a pivotal role in the success and resilience of the arts across the county.

Looking forward, we are focused on strengthening strategic partnerships, particularly with The Arts Council of Ireland, through sustained funding relationships, and on deepening engagement with national resource agencies. Locally, we will continue to nurture strong networks with artists, cultural organisations, community groups, and statutory agencies who help us to drive innovation and inclusion in arts provision.

Carlow County Council acknowledges and thanks all stakeholders who engaged with the consultation process. Their contributions have been integral to the development of this strategy, which sets out a clear and ambitious vision for the future of the arts in County Carlow.

**Councillor Ken Murnane**  
Cathaoirleach

**Coilín O'Reilly**  
Chief Executive

# WELCOME

## and introduction from the Arts Officer



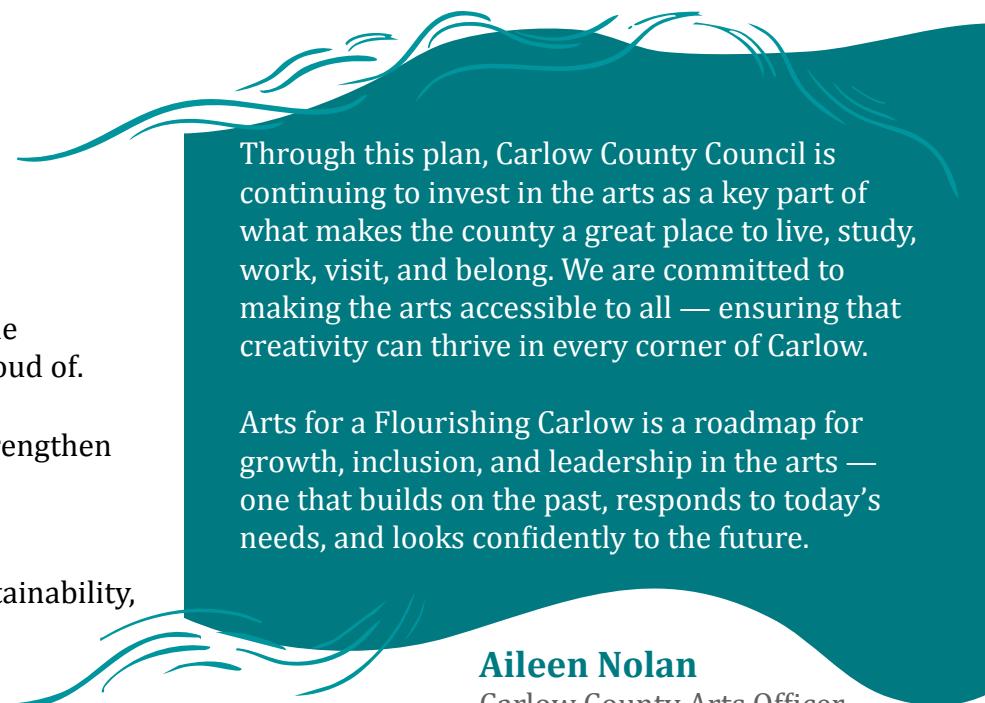
Carlow County Council Arts Office plays a significant leadership role in local arts development, characterised by the active and comprehensive role of our service.

This new Strategic Arts Plan, Arts for a Flourishing Carlow, sets out a clear and focused vision for the next ten years — a plan that reflects the energy, creativity, and community spirit that makes Carlow unique.

Over the past twenty-six years the Arts Service has proven itself to be forward thinking, responsive, collaborative and ambitious in our development of local authority arts provision. As we celebrate the 40th anniversary of Local Authority Arts Officers in 2025 it is a pertinent time to reflect on the changemakers and leaders in this field and to look forward with renewed focus and energy as we lead out on a new Strategic Arts plan for County Carlow.

This plan builds on Carlow's strengths: a vibrant artistic community, a rich cultural heritage, strong partnerships, and collaborations working across local and national organisations. It recognises how important the arts are to the future of our towns, villages, and communities in all aspects of our daily lives.

- **Celebrating and supporting local artists and creative communities**, recognising their vital role in shaping Carlow's future.
- **Supporting place-based arts practice** that reflects Carlow's identity and puts communities at the heart of creative work.
- **Integrating the arts into regeneration and capital projects**, such as the redevelopment of Carlow Town, helping shape spaces that people feel proud of.
- **Working closely with local groups, agencies, and organisations** to strengthen community connections and support creative opportunities countywide.
- **Leading in sustainability and climate action**, aligning with the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the Earth Charter by embedding sustainability, inclusivity, partnership, and innovation throughout.



Through this plan, Carlow County Council is continuing to invest in the arts as a key part of what makes the county a great place to live, study, work, visit, and belong. We are committed to making the arts accessible to all — ensuring that creativity can thrive in every corner of Carlow.

Arts for a Flourishing Carlow is a roadmap for growth, inclusion, and leadership in the arts — one that builds on the past, responds to today's needs, and looks confidently to the future.

**Aileen Nolan**  
Carlow County Arts Officer

# BUILDING THIS PLAN



The development of this plan has been a collaborative journey, characterised by an open and inclusive dialogue with our vibrant arts community, diverse groups of people who live in Carlow, and colleagues across the Council. Alongside focus groups with artists, arts organisations, community groups, and leaders within Council, pop up engagement opportunities were held in public spaces including shopping centres and libraries, and an online survey was promoted widely and sent to groups whose voice may have been missed through other engagement. The invaluable contributions and varied perspectives gathered from artists, arts organisations, and community groups throughout the consultation processes were fundamental to shaping what is a testament to the collective dedication to the arts in Carlow which reflects a shared ambition for its future.

This Strategic Arts Plan articulates a clear and compelling commitment: to not only support and grow but also to powerfully platform the arts, artists, and audiences. It aims to ensure a vibrant, resilient, and sustainable cultural landscape for the decade ahead, fostering an environment where creativity flourishes and enriches the lives of everyone in Carlow.

The plan is responsive to the rich feedback received from stakeholders and is grounded in the demographic and socio-economic realities of Carlow. It also acknowledges the indispensable contribution of the arts to Carlow's future as a progressive, flourishing, and welcoming county, ensuring that creativity remains a central driver of our cultural, social, and economic well-being.

# WHAT DOES CARLOW'S ARTS OFFICE DO?

**This Strategy, developed in 2025, marks the 26th anniversary of the Carlow's Arts Office. During this time the office has evolved from a project-focused entity, into a mature, strategically driven service, deeply embedded in the fabric of our County.**



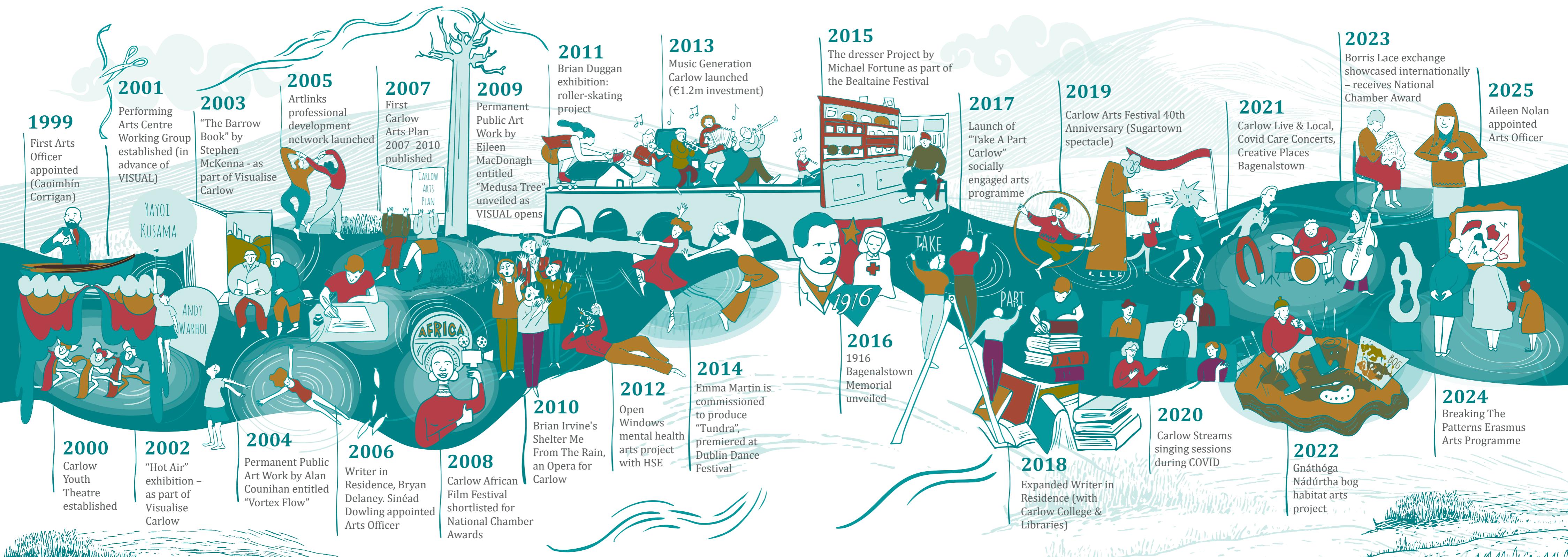
Since 1999 Carlow's Arts Office has served as a cornerstone for artistic and cultural development in the County, providing a range of services that help develop, sustain, and promote the arts in our region. Every year we support artists, arts organisations and communities across the county to engage in the arts, to develop skills and make new work, often in response to or in the context of their lives, places, or situations, and to share it with audiences.

The comprehensive range of services provided by the Arts Office underscores its multifaceted role. These include vital funding schemes, innovative participatory programmes, partnering with collaborators to deliver impactful place-making activities and pioneering eco-based initiatives, arts for health programmes, dynamic artist in residence schemes, and robust community arts initiatives. This broad engagement reflects a commitment to enriching and contributing to the cultural, economic, and social fabric of the county.

This work is resourced through a combination of County Council and Arts Council funding – and so an understanding and honouring of those twin mandates is a vital part of our work.

This Strategic Arts Plan sits alongside the Carlow Culture & Creativity Strategy, which activates the ambitions of the Creative Ireland Programme in Carlow. The Creative Ireland work is also managed by the Arts Office, in parallel with our work in the arts. The Creative Ireland Programme is a time-bound government-led initiative that aims to promote creativity and well-being in communities by fostering the spirit and practice of collaboration and shared purpose.

Engaging across multiple communities in a range of ways unlocks new creative energies and fosters greater social cohesion. Therefore, we are ambitious for this Plan to continue to explicitly activate tailored, place-based, and culturally responsive arts initiatives, addressing the unique needs and interests of different age groups and diverse communities. Fostering deep collaboration with local community development groups builds trust for co-creating relevant arts experiences. This proactive, nuanced approach is essential to ensure equitable access and to fully leverage the cultural potential of Carlow's evolving demographic landscape.



# WHAT IS ART AND CREATIVITY?

Art can be thought of as the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination to reflect, perhaps, beauty or emotion in a visual form. Ireland's Arts Act 2003 suggests those forms can include architecture, dance, film, literature, music, opera, poetry, street art, street spectacle and circus, theatre, verbal arts and visual art; including all aspects of contemporary arts practice such as performance, live art, multimedia, video sound art, etc.

The United Nations defines creativity as the ability to develop and express new ideas. It often connects us with others on an emotional level and inspires actions that create change.

We frame these definitions as a lead into our vision for this Arts Plan. In stakeholder discussions some felt resistance to the term 'art' as being "intimidating or exclusive", or that it "might not be for them". Our communities did not wish for art to be understood as only high art or traditional forms, but rather all forms.

Our vision aims to drive the consolidation of an ecosystem for artists, collectives, and groups in the county, to provide organic ways for people to have the opportunity to engage in the arts, whatever their creative expression or passion may be. This contributes to community life and well-being. In Carlow, for instance, our passions include socially engaged, or place-based arts, eco-social art projects, and more traditional crafts like lacemaking.



# STRATEGIC INTENT



Carlow County Council's Corporate Plan for 2024-2029 lays out a clear over-arching vision for Carlow as a 'progressive, flourishing and welcoming County', with a mission to promote well-being and enhance quality of life. Carlow Local Economic and Community Plan 2023-2029, sets out over a six-year period the objectives and actions needed to promote and support the economic development and the local and community development of the Carlow local authority area, both by itself directly, and in partnership with other economic and community development stakeholders.

There is a wide and established policy landscape locally, nationally, and internationally, and this Strategic Arts Plan is grounded, aligned with, and informed by many of them. This includes the global community's ambitions for the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Complying with and integrating such important ambitions for our community and our planet are also vital to securing ongoing funds, to showing the value of all artforms, and to encourage cross-departmental collaboration within Carlow County Council.

This Arts Plan contributes directly to the County's strategic objectives, allowing us to strengthen our case for resources and political support, and making the arts a must-have activity for the county. The Arts Plan will be implemented in parallel with plans for Libraries, Heritage, Culture, Community, and Sport.

## OUR PURPOSE

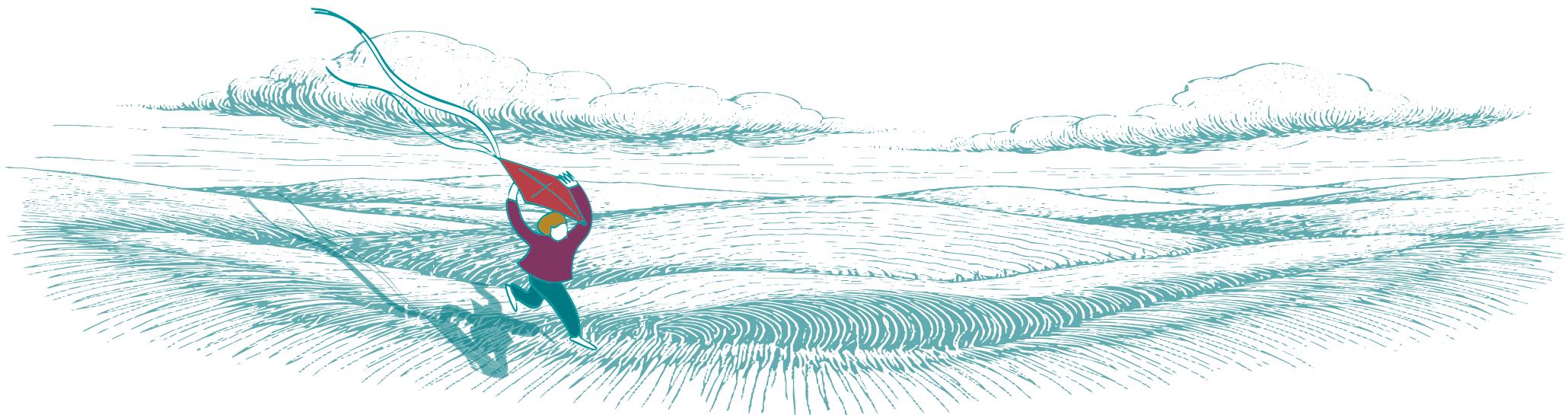
### Supporting, developing, facilitating, and activating the Arts.

This purpose, refined through stakeholder consultations, encapsulates the active and comprehensive role of Carlow Arts Office. It moves beyond a passive support function to emphasise proactive engagement in the entire arts ecosystem, from the initial stages of creation to the final presentation and deep community integration. This dynamic approach reflects our commitment to fostering a vibrant and responsive arts sector.

## OUR VISION

### The Arts are celebrated and valued in Carlow.

We are ambitious for this vision to drive the arts into the heart of the Council and the county, working towards Carlow being an artistically forward place to live, visit, study, and work in. It is designed to resonate directly with every artist, creative community, and audience member in Carlow, to foster a profound sense of belonging and recognition for all forms of creative expression. This vision seeks to broaden the appeal and accessibility of the arts, ensuring that everyone feels their creative endeavours are acknowledged, valued, and celebrated within our county.

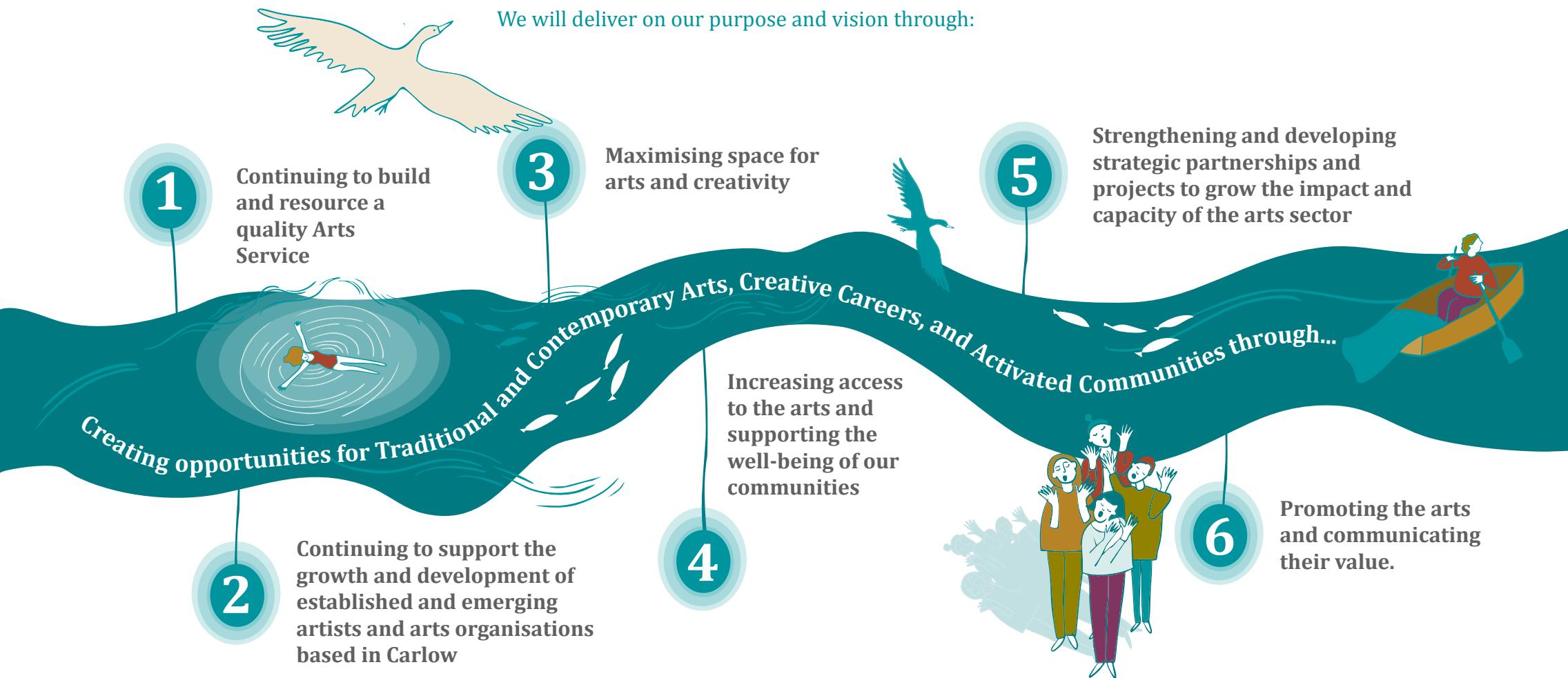


# OUR MISSION

We deliver on our vision by:

**Creating opportunities for Traditional and Contemporary Arts, Creative Careers, and Activated Communities.**

We will deliver on our purpose and vision through:



# OUR CORE VALUES

The values guiding the Carlow Strategic Arts Plan are deeply aligned with the overarching principles of the Carlow County Council Corporate Plan, ensuring a cohesive and integrated approach to county development:



**Inclusivity:** A steadfast commitment to ensuring that arts experiences are accessible, relevant, and welcoming to all communities and demographics across Carlow, embracing the county's rich diversity. This value addresses the need to reach all residents, regardless of background, identity, or location.



**Collaboration:** Prioritising and actively fostering partnership working with individual artists, arts organisations, grassroots community groups, and other local authority departments to maximise collective impact. This approach recognises that shared efforts yield greater results.



**Innovation:** Encouraging and supporting the exploration of new artistic practices, challenging creative boundaries, and developing innovative solutions to local challenges through artistic means. This value drives forward-thinking and creative problem-solving.



**Sustainability:** Promoting environmental responsibility, social equity and progress, and organisational resilience within the arts sector, ensuring its long-term viability and positive impact. This commitment extends to ensuring the arts contribute to a flourishing and sustainable Carlow.



**Excellence:** Upholding high standards in both artistic practice and the delivery of a local authority arts service, building on the legacy of quality in the first 26 years of our work and exemplified by Carlow's flagship arts projects. This value ensures that Carlow's arts offerings are of the highest calibre.



**Accountability & Transparency:** Ensuring clear communication, responsible management of public funds, and measurable impact through robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks. This commitment ensures public trust and effective resource utilisation.

# OUR PILLARS AND STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

Rather than granular, current, or time-based objectives, to follow are high level broad strategic objectives spanning the decade 2025-2035 for delivery. Time-based implementation or business plans will be created annually, which will identify ambitions for the coming period. This plan will have the oversight of the Community Development, Recreation, Amenity, Sports, Arts, Culture, Libraries, Museum & Heritage Strategic Policy Committee, who will receive feedback on its implementation.

The following objectives align with the Carlow County Council Corporate Plan 2024-2029 and integrates with and implements relevant national arts and cultural policies, including the current Arts Council of Ireland's 'Making Great Art Work' Strategy, which will be updated in 2026, as well as their Paying the Artist Policy.

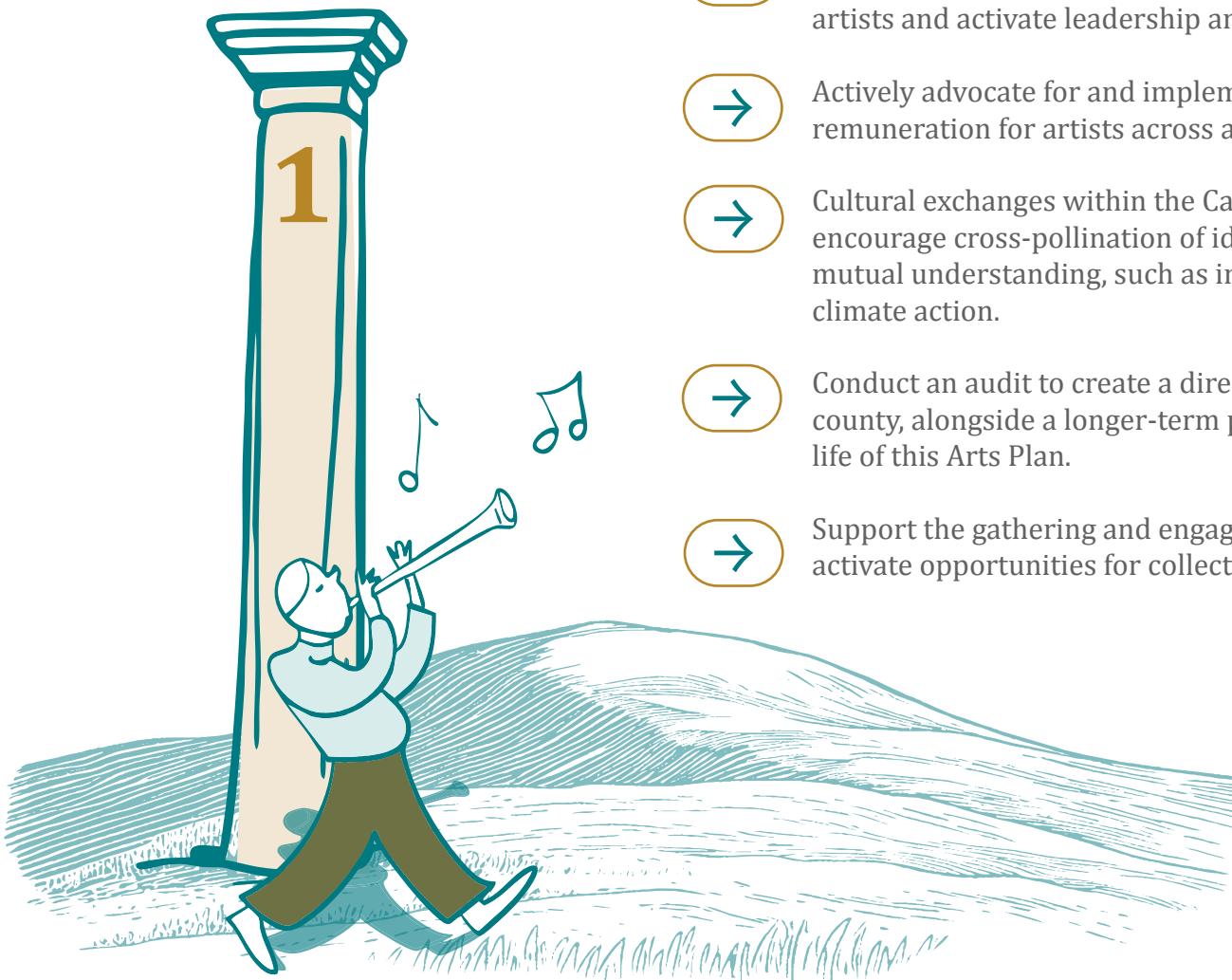
Three core strategic pillars will guide the Carlow Arts Office's work over the next decade, ensuring a comprehensive and impactful approach to arts development. Those pillars range across:



- 1 Nurturing artistic talent and practice**
- 2 Engaging communities and cultivating audiences**
- 3 Strengthening leadership and sustainability**

PILLAR  
**1**

## NURTURING ARTISTIC TALENT AND PRACTICE



Pillar one focuses on fostering a supportive environment for artists at all stages of their careers, ensuring they can live, work, and thrive in Carlow. We will achieve positive outcomes over 2025-2035 by:

- Securing ongoing funding streams that support emerging and established artists in a range of ways, including bursaries, residencies, and mentorship.
- Continue expanding engagement opportunities, professional development programmes, and capacity building to support growing professional pathways for artists and activate leadership and collegiality within this community.
- Actively advocate for and implement policies to ensure equitable pay and fair remuneration for artists across all engagements and all artforms.
- Cultural exchanges within the Carlow community will be fostered and facilitated to encourage cross-pollination of ideas, champion diverse artforms, and deepen mutual understanding, such as initiatives that integrate arts with eco-literacy and climate action.
- Conduct an audit to create a directory of existing artistic working spaces in the county, alongside a longer-term programme to establish artist workspaces over the life of this Arts Plan.
- Support the gathering and engagement of individual and groups of artists to activate opportunities for collectives to develop and empower themselves.

PILLAR  
**2**

## ENGAGING COMMUNITIES AND CULTIVATING AUDIENCES



Pillar two focuses on broadening participation in the arts and fostering a vibrant, curious audience base across all of Carlow. Audience development in Carlow is not merely a marketing challenge but a complex, multi-layered issue deeply intertwined with socio-economic factors, infrastructural limitations, and public perception. We will achieve positive outcomes over 2025-2035 by:

- Continuing to strengthen, strategically resource, and expand place-based and community-led arts programmes that promote social inclusion, intergenerational engagement, and support capacity building in communities that experience barriers to participation. Establish a structured approach to capture and document the research and learning in this work.
- Leverage Carlow's expertise in eco-literacy and climate action by developing innovative arts programmes that address environmental issues and inspire critical thinking among young people.
- Inspire critical thinking and youth engagement by deepening our work with young people in the arts, fostering their voices, creativity, and promoting diversity from an early age.
- Forging new relationships with schools to ensure comprehensive access to arts education and experiences across the county.
- Developing a collaborative audience development strategy with the arts organisations in the County, which activates and leverages existing focuses on long-term engagement, active invitation, and demystification of the arts. Seek to identify barriers to attendance and innovative solutions.

# PILLAR 3

## STRENGTHENING LEADERSHIP AND SUSTAINABILITY



Pillar three focuses on ensuring the long-term viability and impact of the arts sector in Carlow through robust leadership, strategic partnerships, and effective resource management. We will achieve positive outcomes over 2025-2035 by:

- Investing in enhanced communication and marketing strategies to increase engagement and transparency, utilising compelling storytelling and diverse channels to reach all demographics – this will include promoting programming, reporting on the socio-economic and cultural impact of arts initiatives to demonstrate the tangible benefits of the arts to Carlow, and developing a unique value to amplify understanding of the distinct role of the Carlow Arts Office.
- Lead in the development of a Public Art Policy for Carlow and build on the infrastructure and supports to deliver on this under the new Per Cent for Art National Strategy.
- Increase our focus on purposeful internal stakeholder engagement to ensure we actively bridge silos and promote interagency approaches, activating all opportunities to address issues on the ground, by sharing our knowledge of and relationships and embeddedness with the community.
- Continuing to provide strong leadership in local arts development, leveraging our expertise. This includes advocating for the arts within the local authority structure, communicating their value to elected officials, and ensuring their importance in the political landscape.
- Ensuring our strategic relationships are maintained and sustainable, such as with the Arts Council, national resource organisations, local arts organisations, and local voluntary and community sectors to maximise opportunities for artists and communities.
- Ensuring transparency and accountability at all times in our resource management and allocation, including ongoing review and refinement of funding policies and assessment criteria, use of data-driven evaluation indicators to measure impact, reach, and quality of the arts service and local arts development to support future planning and advocacy.

By embracing these recommendations, Carlow County Council can ensure that the arts continue to be a dynamic force for social cohesion, economic vitality, and individual well-being, truly making the vision for the Arts to be celebrated and valued a lived reality for everyone who lives in Carlow.

# IMPLEMENTATION OF THIS PLAN

## - key drivers required

There are 8 key drivers required for the successful implementation of the Arts Plan over the coming decade. The Arts Office will work collaboratively with colleagues in the Council to ensure annual business plans with evaluation metrics are resourced and delivered.



Financial resources

Strategic partnerships

Like-minded allies

Network of activated creatives

Supportive advocates on Council

Community networks who have capacity and knowledge of advocacy and public affairs

Public support

Monitoring, evaluating, and iterating.



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our sincere thanks to all the artists, arts organisations, community groups, and individuals who took part in the consultation process for this Arts Plan. Thanks to Carlow County Council colleagues and the Carlow Culture & Creativity Team who contributed their time and expertise to the plan and to the elected members of Carlow County Council for their input and continued support.

Thank you also to our partners in The Arts Council, the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport, Music Generation, Take A Part Carlow, KCETB, Carlow Regional Youth Services, and Creative Ireland.

Warm thanks to Rowena Neville of Blue Line Consulting who expertly supported the research, development and consultation process that led to this current Arts Plan.





### **Carlow Arts Service:**

Michael Brennan, Director of Services; Aileen Nolan, Arts Officer; Kelly Mooney, Assistant Arts Officer; Áine Donohoe, Assistant Arts Officer; Caitríona Roberts, Creative Communities Engagement Officer, David Francis Moore, Creative Places Bagenalstown Coordinator. A special word of thanks and best wishes to Sinead Dowling, as she enjoys her career break. Without her years of dedicated service, mentorship and leadership the Arts Services would not be what it is today.

### **Community Development, Recreation, Amenity, Sports, Arts, Culture, Libraries, Museum & Heritage Strategic Policy Committee:**

Cllr. William Quinn, Cllr Jim Deane, Cllr. Fintan Phelan, Cllr. Ben Ward, Aisling O' Halloran (PPN Community & Voluntary), Eileen Doyle (PPN Community & Voluntary), Trish Doyle (PPN Social Inclusion) Deirdre O'Connell (Fórsa).

### **Carlow County Council Elected Members:**

Cllr. Andrea Dalton, Councillor Fintan Phelan, Cllr. Thomas Kinsella, Cllr. John Pender, Cllr. Fergal Browne, Councillor John Cassin, Cllr. Michael Doran, Cllr. Andy Gladney, Cllr. Ken Murnane, Cllr. Charlie Murphy, Cllr. Brian O'Donoghue, Cllr. William Paton, Cllr. William Quinn, Cllr. Jim Deane, Cllr. Paul Doogue, Cllr. Daniel Pender, Cllr. Adrienne Wallace, Cllr. Ben Ward.

### **Carlow County Council Management Team:**

Coilín O'Reilly, Chief Executive; Michael Brennan, Director of Services: Community Development, Recreation, Amenity, Sports, Arts, Culture, Libraries, Museum & Heritage; Pádraig O'Gorman, Director of Services: Transportation, Environment and Climate Action, Capital Projects, Building Control & Emergency Services; Paula O'Brien Director of Services: Planning, Economic Development, Regeneration and Corporate Services; Fiona O'Neill, Acting Director of Services: Housing & Ukrainian Humanitarian Response; PJ Leonard, Director of Finance and ICT.

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