

NATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR THE ARTS TWO CASE STUDIES FROM GROUPS AROUND THE COUNTRY

OFFALY CASE STUDY

TEN STEPS TO MAKE THE NATIONAL CAMPAIGN LOCAL

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1. SOMEONE HAS TO DRIVE IT

While Theatre Forum acted very successfully as the catalyst for the NCFA, you need someone to take on this role to drive the campaign at county level. In Offaly, Birr Theatre and Arts Centre, as the key arts infrastructure in the county, felt they had a responsibility to step up to this role. On September 24th 2009, the board of Birr Theatre and Arts Centre discussed it as an agenda item and agreed the NCFA was a priority. We initiated contact with a number of other arts organizations/projects in the county and convened a meeting to discuss what could be done at county level.

2. NINE ORGANISATIONS TO REPRESENT THE COUNTY

In Offaly, the nine organisations involved were:

- geographically spread around the county
- a variety of art-forms
- a variety of arts venues, projects and individual artists

In addition, the person representing each organisation was senior: a board member, artistic director or owner.

3. BIG PICTURE, SHORT TIMELINE

Setting out the parameters and the commitment required from participants, is key from the beginning. At the first meeting, the Offaly group agreed to lobby under the name, Offaly's Campaign for the Arts. We agreed that:

- We would meet for an hour and a half, weekly, for the next six Mondays only (up to the budget).
- Each participant would agree to take on a specific action/s per week (agreed action points circulated every Tuesday).
- We would campaign only for the 'big picture' set out by the national campaign, with local issues tagged on: to maintain the county arts budget, to keep the county arts officer and have the Per Cent for Art funding accessed.
- We would try to collect as many signatures as possible for the NCFA petition
- To highlight the benefit that investment in the arts brings to the county, we each undertook to prepare a press statement and photos of our projects with agreed deadlines. They were then issued each week of the campaign to local press. All of them carrying the same information regarding the NCFA and website details.

4. DON'T FORGET THE AUDIENCES

Talk about it on the county stages!

At as many arts events as possible, one of the campaign participants spoke briefly about it before shows taking place in Birr Theatre and Arts Centre and other venues, appealing to audiences to sign the NCFA petition which also included our local issues. Arts Centre staff distributed sheets after each such event to capture names and email addresses for the petition.

5. THE POLITICIANS ARE WAITING

Contacting politicians, local and national, is the main activity of the campaign. They expect to be contacted so don't let them down!

In Offaly, we sent out a two-page letter – with everyone's signature on it - setting out the NCFA position, with a paragraph outlining local issues. This letter was sent to:

- Town Councillors
- County Councillors
- Key national politicians (Taoiseach, Minister for Finance, Arts Minister, Arts spokespeople for all parties, local TD's and Senator)
- County Manager
- Senior staff in the County Council

We then broke down the councillor list by electoral area, and each campaign participant agreed to do a follow-up call to the councillors local to their area to reiterate the messages in the letter and offer to meet the councillor if they wanted to find out more.

We also looked to present at the November Council meeting (wasn't possible), but succeeded in meeting with the Cathaoirleach of the Council just before the meeting to present him with hard copies of the 1,000+ signatures we had collected in the county in support of the NCFA petition – and made sure the local media knew about this meeting and took a photo of it!

We also had a motion debated and carried unanimously at that meeting of Offaly County Council. This motion was tabled by the Councillor who chairs the Strategic Policy Committee which has responsibility for cultural policy in Offaly. She was also present at the photo op referred to in above paragraph. The wording and information on the motion was supplied by ourselves. Much of it sourced through the Theatre Forum website.

6. USE THE MEDIA

Don't forget the power of the local press.

After the first meeting, we did up a press statement about the plans and launched the Offaly campaign to kick off some coverage in local media. We then sent weekly updates on the campaign's progress to local media, tagging on information on at least one of the participating arts organizations/projects each week for the local interest. The photo of us presenting the County Council Cathaoirleach with the petition signatures appeared in all local press in the week before the budget. We also did two in studio radio interviews on

Midlands 103, one in conjunction with the County Laois Arts Officer. We had an article published in December in the Midlands Culture magazine in relation to NCFA.

7. GO ONLINE

While we couldn't afford to create a website just for the Offaly local campaign, we created Facebook and Bebo pages for the campaign, which connected up the NCFA website. We collected approximately 150 extra petition signatures in this way. We also linked our own websites to the NCFA.

We used all our own databases to encourage people to sign on to NCFA online petition.

8. MAKE THE MOST OF LOCAL FAME

Who's famous from your county?

In Offaly, we approached Mundy, Roesy and Roger Whittaker (not native but was living in Offaly) to provide a few words of endorsement of the campaign, and then used their quotes to give us another opportunity to generate press coverage: "Mundy lends his voice to the National Campaign for the Arts in Offaly".

9. RESOURCES, WHAT RESOURCES?

The Offaly county campaign had no budget, and no staff. However, lots of people gave their time for free to the campaign, particularly the nine arts organization representatives.

We used the material created by the NCFA and other counties as the main text for letters, press statements and phone call scripts – no need to reinvent the wheel.

Birr Arts Centre provided paper, envelopes and stamps for the letter campaign, as well as their database of local political names. Birr Theatre and Arts Centre's PR consultant also did the weekly media updates and acted as press consultant.

10. AFTER THE SHOW

Plans to reconvene were deferred due to bad weather, however, recent phone calls have confirmed that the experience has had positive outcomes.

The Arts Officer has had her contract of employment renewed, signed off by the Minister in December. The County Council Arts budget has not had too much of a hit in the circumstances. We can all live with the situation. We were delighted to play our part in the National Campaign led by Theatre Forum and the fact that the national picture for the Arts is not as bleak as recommended in the McCarthy report. We intend to explore the potential of setting up an Offaly Artists Forum.

ENDS

Dublin Central Arts Workers **Experiences from 2009**

(Gavin Kostick email gavinkostick@gmail.com)

On the lobbying politicians front, things I have learned:

(1) Talk to Councillors. They are all in political parties and are often closely connected to TDs and other decision makers.

(2) Go to see your TD in pairs. This is useful as:

(a) It provides moral support.

(b) It gives you a chance to keep each other on message.

(c) One of you can take notes.

(d) It gives you room to breathe in thinking 'how is this going', 'have we covered everything'.

(e) It makes it a matter of record.

(3) Listen to what your TD has to say! They're people too. Take on board their perspective. Complaining isn't attractive, constructive engagement is. Politicians appreciate recognition where it is due.

(4) Each TD is trying to tell a political story to themselves and to the public. Be aware of what that story is - tell it back to them (e.g. FF have established 60 excellent venues across Ireland), and how what you're asking for adds to that story (e.g. having done that, it is time to look at how to provide human resources to make them vibrant cultural hubs). All politicians are looking to tell a convincing story to their communities (us), which might get them re-elected.

For example, FF/Greens are all about saying they have made tough decisions and 'sharing the pain'. That was the mantra in 2009. We have to help them to tell the story of how, within that, they can make smart decisions for the economy and how they laid the foundations for the recovery.

(5) Governments govern in the national interest. That's their job. What we are looking for is in the national interest as arts and culture - which are a big success story - are part of the recovery. It comes back to: this is good in itself and it's good for communities, jobs, economic revenues, international recognition.

(6) Have local concrete examples of success in mind. Politicians get the abstract argument (the Arts are good). Give them a good thing that they can appreciate in their own constituency that makes it real. It's also okay to give a negative - we've lost this in this area for lack of support to the detriment of xyz.

(7) Try to make one clear point at a time and let them reply. It's a conversation not a lecture. If you do go on, it's okay to say, "sorry I'm going on here, but I'm passionate about this."

(8) Remember you're speaking for more than yourself, you're speaking for a community.

(9) At the end, go back over key points and indicate what action you have agreed, and that if you are agreed (e.g. the TD will represent to the Minister that the arts should be supported) you will be reporting this back to your members/the NCFA. Politicians like the publicity - Joe Soap TD supports the arts - and it keeps them honest. While the general conversation will have been useful, politicians are pretty busy and like a nice short checklist 'to do' which they know that if they do, they'll get appropriate credit for it.

(10) Thank them for their time. It's not a bad thing to be polite as we will be coming back for more. It's not bad for them to think, 'that was a really interesting meeting, now I want to do something for these people'.

(11) All these conversations are worth it! What we're going is creating a national, human conversation in which it gets normalised that the tone is, 'of course this country has to support the arts'. No one conversation will get us a load of cash, but all together it becomes how investment in the arts is part of the recovery (which it is, that's the good bit) and what's the best way of achieving this, rather than seeing the arts as a luxury which regretfully we're going to do away with.

ENDS