A policy review of *The Art of Recovery - Survive: Stabilise: Strengthen. The Report of the Culture, Arts and Heritage Recovery Taskforce*, Northern Ireland Executive. August 2021.

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Summary:

Focusing on a report published by the Department for Communities (DfC) in the Northern Ireland Executive and the recently established Culture, Arts and Heritage Recovery Taskforce, this paper employs a narrative policy analysis methodology to trace the different and often competing stories which underpin the report.

Abstract:

This is a review of *The Art of Recovery - Survive: Stabilise: Strengthen. The Report of the Culture, Arts and Heritage Recovery Taskforce.* It focuses on a report published by the Department for Communities (DfC) in the Northern Ireland Executive and the recently established Culture, Arts and Heritage Recovery Taskforce. This paper employs a narrative policy analysis methodology to trace the different and often competing stories which underpin the report.

Key words: Department for Communities, Northern Ireland Executive; Narrative Policy Analysis; Covid-19; Cultural Recovery

A policy review of
*The Art of Recovery
- Survive: Stabilise:
Strengthen*
JOHN WRIGHT

Introduction

In May 2021, the Communities Minister in the Northern Ireland Executive, Deirdre Hargey, established a Culture, Arts & Heritage Recovery Taskforce to operate in Northern Ireland (NI). The Taskforce's main aim was to consider short term measures in response to the impact of COVID-19 on the cultural and heritage sectors in NI. The Taskforce was also future facing and had a longer term aim to pave the way for a cultural strategy for NI. After extensive consultation and data gathering, the Taskforce, in collaboration with the DfC, produced a report which presented findings and policy recommendations in order to both re-open sectors and develop longer term sustainability. What is vital to understand is that reports which speak to policy, such as the one in question, are more than snapshots of a moment; they are instead imbued with multiple histories which are constantly being re-written through storytelling. Some of these stories appear and re-appear in difficult policy issues which often feel intractable (Roe, 1994, p.52-75). However, by reframing these issues through an analysis of the different and sometimes competing narratives involved, new perspectives can be gleaned. This following investigation is based upon a narrative policy analysis developed by Emery Roe (Roe,1994). Roe's methodology is based upon a practical model which aims to tell both dominant and countervailing policy stories in an effort to establish a metanarrative which can help negotiate future policy decisions in difficult or sensitive areas.

Before this analysis commences it is important to contextualise my position in relation to the report. In my capacity as a postdoctoral research associate with the Centre for Cultural Value (CCV) at the University of Leeds, I was in the initial stages of a policy placement with the DfC during the development of the Taskforce. Indeed, I was able to contribute data and evidence from CCV's UK-wide research project into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the cultural sector directly to the Taskforce (Walmsley et al., 2022). As a result, a

A policy review of
The Art of Recovery
- Survive: Stabilise:
Strengthen
JOHN WRIGHT

proportion of this evidence was utilised in the report to support specific findings. Although, I was not directly involved in the construction of the report or its findings and recommendations, I was involved in the consultancy process and thus I position myself as a 'critical friend' to the report. This perspective, as both an outsider and a partial insider to the process underpinning the report, helps to nuance this paper.

Analysis

Stories of crisis: 'Survive'

What's in a name? It is often prudent to commence with the arbitrary moniker as it always reveals intrinsic meanings far beyond its inscription. In this case, the title of the report – *The Art of Recovery - Survive: Stabilise: Strengthen* (Department for Communities, 2021) – illuminates both historical and contemporary narratives between cultural policy and the cultural sector in NI. Firstly, I will deal with the phrase before the hyphen in order to determine the central theme of the report. On the face of it, *The Art of Recovery* alludes to the main narrative within the report which details the size and scope of the social, economic and cultural impact of the pandemic on the cultural and heritage sectors and what is needed in order for the sectors to recover. However, it also is indicative of several other interconnecting stories which extend beyond the pandemic and are historically embedded in NI. This is first referenced in the foreword by Rotha Johnston and sets the tone for the report. Johnston suggests that:

> For too many years we have not adequately nurtured, fostered or valued the cultural and heritage places and productions that add so much value to our lives, health and economy (Department for Communities, 2021, p.4).

A policy review of
The Art of Recovery
- Survive: Stabilise:
Strengthen
JOHN WRIGHT

Although this historical inadequacy is hinted at in the financial and capital investment in heritage sections of the report, it is not made explicit. Indeed, this underinvestment in arts and culture is not approached in the report until the final section on 'Issues to be considered during development of the Strategy' (Department for Communities, 2021, p.50). However, the importance of this story cannot be underestimated in the Taskforce's approach to this report as it was a key consideration in their thinking throughout the process of developing their recommendations.

In a paper released by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) detailing public funding patterns over the last ten years, this trend is documented with an approximate 40% decline from the ACNI's exchequer budget in arts and culture in NI (ACNI, 2022, p.4). This situation is compounded when comparison is made with the Welsh and Scottish arts and culture budget per capita. According to FactCheckNI, in 2017 the public expenditure in NI was over 50% less per capita of the Scottish and Welsh public spend (FactCheckNI, 2019). Of course, it must be noted that these budgets are configured by the UK treasury through the Barnett formula, and the terms are slightly different across the devolved governments (Institute for Government, 2022). Nevertheless, it brings into question the precarious position which cultural sectors found themselves in during those first few months of restrictions. As the report states in the title, after the hyphen, *survival* was and remains a reality in sectors which were already strained before the pandemic.

Survival is framed at the beginning of the story within the report. It is positioned as a base point for the arts, heritage and cultural sectors. However, the word is synonymous with another narrative within arts and cultural policy rhetoric in the UK. This story is of perpetual crisis and has recently become the subject of scrutiny within cultural policy research by Eleonora Belfiore and Steven Hadley (2018). The authors argue that:

#9

A policy review of
The Art of Recovery
- Survive: Stabilise:
Strengthen
JOHN WRIGHT

> It is the vanity of every age to consider itself in crisis. Moreover, it is emblematic of both the history of UK cultural policy – and more directly the psychodynamics of the subsidised arts – for this mode of crisis to be both perpetual and endlessly new (Hadley and Belfiore, 2018, p.218).

The NI context is not an outlier of this trend as is evident in arts and cultural discourse over the decades. Examples include 'Northern Irish Arts Sidelined' (Arts Professional, 2005), and in the discourse historically documented in Conor Carville's recent article on arts and cultural policies of the 1960s and 1970s (Carville, 2020). This story is subtle yet important, because although the pandemic has undoubtedly impacted the NI cultural sectors in all the ways which the report highlights, it would be a mistake to think that the pandemic is historically isolated and that the use of the word 'survival' is only relevant to a particular timeframe. Its relevance has a longer history and the current 'crisis' is one which has further highlighted the problems facing the cultural sectors in NI.

The value narrative: 'stabilise and strengthen'

Counter to this narrative are the instrumental values of arts and culture which are repeatedly highlighted by policymakers, governments and advocates. The report is no exception: throughout it makes the case for culture by highlighting these values. From economic benefits to health and wellbeing impacts, each of the sections and recommendation in the report are structured around these values. In the introduction to the report the Taskforce stated that:

> The arts are a major contributor to employment in NI, with almost 6,000 jobs and over 9,000 volunteers. It is also a crucial lynchpin in the development of the creative industries with the arts a key component of

#9

A policy review of
*The Art of Recovery
- Survive: Stabilise:
Strengthen*
JOHN WRIGHT

our broader creative economy which employs over 50,000 people (Department for Communities, 2021, p.9).

These much-discussed employment statistics mask some of the nuances and realities facing cultural workers in NI. The report specifically focuses in on some of these issues in the financial section pertaining to individuals. It highlights the precariousness of freelance cultural workers stating that:

> many freelancers essentially have a portfolio income made up of often short-term payroll and fee-paying assignments, making them ineligible for some of the government support mechanisms (Department for Communities, 2021, p.17)

Again, there is a lengthy discourse around this issue, as traced by Ali Fitzgibbon and Ioannis Tsioulakis (2020). The authors state that 'precarious 'gig' and portfolio work has long dominated creative economy labour patterns' (Fitzgibbon and Tsioulakis, 2020, p.3).

Interestingly, the report goes on to recommend an immediate response to this situation which not only relates to survival of the arts and cultural sectors but begins to move into the realms of stability and strengthening. The Taskforce advocates for a more inclusive approach to grants:

> Support should be flexible, accessible and be open to all those who create or assist in the creation or production of work or delivery of activities across the professional, amateur and community sectors (Department for Communities, 2021, p.18)

There was much discussion in and around the Taskforce meetings about support not just for artists but for those cultural and creative workers which intersect with the arts and broader cultural economy. The complexity of

A policy review of
*The Art of Recovery
- Survive: Stabilise:
Strengthen*
JOHN WRIGHT

working patterns and roles highlights the initial inadequacy of cultural public emergency funding in response to the pandemic which has been well documented by various studies and reports (Warmsley et al., 2022; Jones 2022; Fitzgibbon and Tsioulakis, 2020).

Another example of these instrumental values is in the health and wellbeing section of the report. The report highlights the contribution which arts and culture can make to health and wellbeing and its central importance to the Executive's policies:

> The wellbeing of those who live and work here is central to the Executive's Programme for Government and the eleven council community plans and it is important that the cultural sector plays a key role in recovery (Department for Communities, 2021, p.31)

The report continues to cite mental health and wellbeing studies which captured concerning levels of anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts/actions across the arts and cultural sectors. These studies were undertaken prior to the pandemic and the Taskforce argue that this situation will only increase with the impact of the pandemic on cultural workers livelihoods still not fully understood. Much of this section of the report is focused on this interrelationship between livelihood and mental health and wellbeing, but towards the end of the report the Taskforce touch upon another important interrelationship. The report makes the connection between culture, health and wellbeing in a more intrinsic sense as key to public health through participation which can lead to the creation of new communities and further social interrelationships (Department for Communities, 2021, p.32).

This narrative is at the edges of the Taskforce's terms of engagement, and it is thus not fully articulated by the report. However, it is vital to understand as it is a strong value narrative particularly when considering the final title word

A policy review of
*The Art of Recovery
- Survive: Stabilise:
Strengthen*
JOHN WRIGHT

'strengthen'. It concerns the interrelationship between everyday creativity and intrinsic health and wellbeing benefits. This relationship between health, wellbeing and everyday creativity is articulated by Nick Ewbank. Ewbank (2020) cites a substantial body of evidence in a major review of over 3,000 studies by the World Health Organisation (WHO). Although it was a vital study, it still places arts and culture in a medical paradigm. Ewbank argued that 'there's also a broader role for the arts in helping people to adjust to problems brought about by life's processes and difficulties' (Ewbank 2020). This is the crux of the matter and where a deeper understanding of the relationship between everyday creativity, health and wellbeing by policymakers could instigate real change, not just for the cultural and creative economy but on a broader societal level. The report hints at this when making assertions about the need to invest in third sector organisations and voluntary arts activity. However, I would argue that this narrative is underrepresented in the report in terms of potential importance for cross-sector collaboration.

Towards a metanarrative

In the final words of Roe's introduction to narrative policy analysis, a curious, but fundamental point is made about the methodology behind the approach:

> To undertake a narrative policy analysis is not merely to start with the uncertain, complex, and polarized. It is to legitimate and maintain that uncertainty, complexity, and polarization (Roe, 1994, p.17).

One of the polarizations within policy in NI, indeed in the UK, is *why should 'culture' get funding when people don't have adequate healthcare or housing*. This of course, played out in the pandemic on a previously unimaginable scale with governments around the world diverting funds to emergency public health measures (Rahim et al., 2020). Yet, the binary opposition within this statement betrays the complexity and uncertainty of the stories and

#9

A policy review of
The Art of Recovery - Survive: Stabilise: Strengthen
JOHN WRIGHT

counternarratives discussed throughout this review. As the Taskforce's report testifies, 'culture' is not homogenous, and 'it' does not exist in some separate realm. The instrumental, intrinsic and institutional values of arts and culture permeate throughout society whether in interrelationships with health and wellbeing, economy and employment.

These interrelationships are nothing new but understanding their value stories and how policymaking can best support them is still not fully realised despite decades of evidence and policy initiatives (Carville, 2020). There is of course unique power and constitutional dynamics within NI but these themselves are integral to the metanarrative, and it would be a mistake to think that they are fixed. The report itself is a beginning of this negotiation, but whether its recommendations have long-term impact remains to be seen. However, through beginning to focus on how arts and culture has multiple stories that interrelate and permeate across society in a tangible way, the report moves the conversation towards a metanarrative which can remove unhelpful binaries.

The final remarks of this review need to be dedicated to the title of the report: *The Art of Recovery - Survive: Stabilise: Strengthen.* This is more than an empty moniker; rather it signifies a process, and at that one which is everchanging and ongoing. This is evident in the formation of the Taskforce because it did not spontaneously come into being, but rather it has been called for by the arts and culture sector for many years (Arts Collaboration Network, 2020).

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#9

A policy review of
*The Art of Recovery
- Survive: Stabilise:
Strengthen*
JOHN WRIGHT

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A policy review of
*The Art of Recovery
- Survive: Stabilise:
Strengthen*
JOHN WRIGHT

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