

mermaid

COUNTY WICKLOW ARTS CENTRE

Strategic Plan 2024 – 2027





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Updated and Revised from 2021 – 2024

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Foreword

In their recent essay *On Connection*, author, poet and recording artist Kae Tempest observes:

Connection is collaborative [...] We, the readers or listeners, are crucial to the text, story or song becoming powerful. We are not impartial observers; we are a fundamental part of the circuitry; if we are not connected, the charge will not be able to flow.

[...] for the connection to happen, the creator of work, the work itself, and the person who will take that work on so that it will come to life need to be equally activated, conducting the energy, so the bulb can light up....

This plan outlines the measures that the board and executive will take over the course of the next five years to ensure that Mermaid can continue to create such connections, can become increasingly inclusive in our ways of working and can grow in such a way that we can sustainably increase the available opportunities for artists and audiences to connect.



About Us

Mermaid Arts Centre is County Wicklow's creative engine-room. Since 2002, our building has been a celebratory stage for artists and communities locally. We believe in the power of shared experience and connection, and in the right to freedom of artistic expression and creation for all.

Our Purpose: We exist to create connection.

Our work connects artists and communities across County Wicklow in exchanging artistic experiences that spark curiosity, delight, and debate, while fostering pride, pleasure, and well-being, for all.

Our Vision: The home for creative communities in Wicklow.

We will be the arts centre of choice for Ireland's artists, driving impact in our role as the engine-room of creativity, embedding and activating co-creation opportunities in key communities across Wicklow.

Our Mission: We implement our purpose & live our values by:

- Gathering artists and audiences together to create, participate in and enjoy unforgettable artistic experiences.
- Providing an artist-led creative hub and artistic resource for artists and companies in County Wicklow, working in both professional and amateur contexts.
- Sustaining the work of artists through employment opportunities, advocacy, and practical supports for their creative development.
- Enriching the lives of all communities in County Wicklow through the creation, co-creation, and presentation of a diverse programme of excellent contemporary arts experiences.



Our Values:

Our values are central to how we think and how we work. At Mermaid, we value:

Imagination

We prize imagination as the well-spring of creativity, resourcefulness and empathy. It enables us to ask "what if", to imagine, and to dream. It is at the heart of our spirit of open-mindedness and innovation, driving us forward.

Inclusion

We are committed to being welcoming, kind and supportive to all those who work with us or visit us, striving for solidarity, connection and inclusion within our organisation and the wider community.

Collaboration

We believe in collaboration and cooperation, sharing our knowledge and resources generously, and developing partnerships from a place of openness.

Excellence

We strive for professionalism in our work and take pride in being recognised as a leading arts organisation delivering excellence in cultural experiences as part of a vital national and local arts infrastructure.

Integrity

When we make a commitment, we honour it. We believe in accountability and fairness. We run our business efficiently and sustainably. We uphold our values in everything we do.

Our Strategic Goals

In early 2024 the executive, Board, and local artists convened in a series of workshops to interrogate the ambitions in Mermaid’s strategic plan. Our purpose, vision, and mission were updated, and our strategic goals were refined.

These goals are underpinned by our ambition to be a more sustainable organisation by ensuring we are inclusive of, and relevant for, as much of our community as possible. These goals outline a sustainable, inclusive, and developmental approach to this vision across our activities, through our people, facilities, services, events, and experiences. Our strategic implementation plan takes account of the fact that these are often slow and deliberate processes, that don’t produce quickly visible change, but rather require sustained commitment over time.

Goal 1	Mermaid for Connection & Wellbeing in Co. Wicklow
Goal 2	Mermaid for Championing Artists & New Work Development
Goal 3	Mermaid for Working Sustainably

One ambition that was acknowledged and shared by all was the need to improve space at Mermaid. The existing space needs to be:

- made more accessible for artists, audiences, and staff
- improved to be more environmentally sustainable
- additional space is needed to support communities who want to deepen their active participation in the arts.

Whether through creative learning workshops or creating/co-creating work of their own, to support more performers on and backstage, provide resources for rehearsal, and crucially, to provide what’s needed to develop and make more work in Wicklow - studios and maker spaces – more focus is needed on space in the coming period.



Strategic Goal 1

Mermaid for Connection & Wellbeing in Co. Wicklow

Our goal for 2021-2025 was to increase Mermaid's relevance as an arts and cultural resource which is inclusive, and representative of all the people of Wicklow, through increasing opportunities for public engagement countywide, honing our communications, and redoubling our commitment to equity, diversity and inclusive arts practices.

Why This Goal:

We believe absolutely in the right to freedom of artistic expression and creation for all. We believe that one of the major imperatives for artistic innovation right now, is less about innovation in artistic form but rather about the innovations we make around who has access to art, to the making of art and to artistic discourse. This goal is informed by the emphasis in the wider policy context on the necessity for publicly funded arts and culture to be characterised by greater access, participation and collaboration, but our actions are driven by a fundamental belief in the power of shared experience.

Objectives

1. Establish a Change Plan which articulates our commitment to inclusive best practices throughout our organisation and our activities.
2. Deepen our relationship with existing audiences and grow new audiences by building on existing excellence in Mermaid programme and presenting programme more widely around, and with more diverse communities in, County Wicklow
3. Develop a communications strategy that strongly articulates Mermaid's story and brand narrative and includes a digital strategy alongside an implementation plan for communications on organisational activities.

In the first three years of delivery, digital communications have improved, and our work in inclusive practices has been focused and broad, moving the programme out into the county and engaging with communities in new ways. However, with the fracturing of information sources, it's becoming harder to reach all audiences effectively with the resources at hand. In 2024-2027 we will strategically approach the need to reconnect with less engaged audiences via programming, visibility, and relevant messaging.

Actions & Outcomes to Date:

- Mermaid is regularly presenting programme offsite in locations countywide and this work is fully funded. Although this work has begun, the work is continuing to make the case for sustained and sustainable funding.
- A new Communications Strategy has been rigorously researched, written up and rolled out, with regular monitoring and review to assess its effectiveness.
- We have increased human resources in our Communications team, as well as increased spend overall.
- Our presence in the digital landscape is vastly improved, and the voice and brand identity for Mermaid are being regularly refined.

Work to be Further Focused on 2024-2027:

- Mermaid completes our ED&I Plan as an inclusive engagement model for development of new programme initiatives.
- Diverse communities all over County Wicklow feel a stronger sense of ownership over their local arts centre and its activities.
- There is an increase in the number of people who rate Mermaid's work as relevant to their lives in County Wicklow. This is ongoing work and will be monitored.
- Mermaid has strong community partnerships and is working openly and effectively with local communities in the regular co-creation and presentation of programme countywide.
- More people can quickly describe what Mermaid is and does (greater focus on institutional vs programmatic marketing).

Strategic Goal 2

Mermaid for Championing Artists & New Work Development

Our goal for 2021-2025 was to Champion artists, their development and their work and contribute to a sustainable and inclusive future for artists and the arts economy in County Wicklow, and nationally, through meaningful partnership, dialogue and maintaining an artist-centred approach to our work.

Why This Goal:

Artists make enormous contributions to society by offering us reflective spaces to consider our shared world, by making work that draws us together, exhilarates us, illuminates ideas and feelings, and in so doing play an important role in producing civic pride and well-being. There is no Arts Centre without artists. However, artists face increasingly steep challenges in accessing support and space and around pay and conditions. The actions below seek to contribute to stemming the flow of artists either out of the sector, the country, or both.

Objectives

1. Work with professional artists and cultural stakeholders to understand diverse needs, create responses and enhance support for sustainable creative/cultural career development.
2. Retain and develop artist-led programmes.
3. Grow producing and curating capacity in Mermaid to increase practical supports for artists.
4. Ensure Mermaid facilities are fit for professional practice & development work by artists of all abilities.

In the first three years of delivery, objectives 1-3 have achieved positive outcomes, and will continue to be addressed. We will focus on objective 4, to target further accessibility of our venue and programmes, along with ensuring wider understanding of our curation and artistic policy and creating further connections with Wicklow's artists, wherever in the county they are.

Actions & Outcomes to Date:

- Mermaid is a recognised leader in relation to working conditions, pay, and sustainable career development for artists.
- Mermaid has an understanding of the barriers to access for artists from all backgrounds and actively works to remove these barriers. This work is a continuing focus.
- Artist-led programmes including TRANSFORM Associate Artist Scheme and GAP DAY have been funded and appropriately staffed, though TRANSFORM saw a reduction in capacity in 2024, due to funding limitations.
- Mermaid has team members working alongside CEO dedicated to gallery curation and participation.
- More artists are supported to make work in their own county.

Work to be Further Focused on 2024-2027:

- Mermaid has a strong, clear artistic policy that is widely understood and informed by the artistic community in Wicklow and beyond.
- Mermaid resources and facilities are fully accessible & fit for purpose and continue to be made available to artists for professional practice development as support-in-kind.
- Mermaid is preparing to apply for multi-year funding in 2025 for 2026-2028, with the ambition of securing the resources to continue TRANSFORM and GAP DAY in meaningful ways, and to better resource our commissioning work through MermaidSPACE.

Strategic Goal 3

Mermaid for Working Sustainably

Maximise Mermaid's impact by ensuring we have the capacity and resources to deliver on our ambitions sustainably.

Why This Goal:

We are living through an era of unprecedented change in terms of both post-Covid recovery and the ongoing impact of climate change. We wish to do more to respond to these challenges, but to do more, Mermaid needs to organise for impact. It is imperative that we balance growth with stability as we reckon with these changes and grow our income sustainably, alongside growing the team, improving working conditions and future proofing the building, so that artists, staff and communities all benefit from that growth. The objectives below ensure that Mermaid has, and sustains for the future, appropriate capacity, capability and resources.

Objectives

1. Increase income levels sustainably across all sources over the lifetime of this plan
2. Restore sustainability and capacity within the Mermaid team by addressing staffing levels, training, pay & conditions
3. Ensure Mermaid demonstrates leadership and best practice in governance
4. Futureproof our building for all who use it in tandem with developing our organisational climate policy which demonstrates environmental commitment and reporting during 2024.

In the first three years of delivery, we've grown the team, improved pay and conditions, and embedded regular professional development for staff. Income levels have increased at box office and public subsidy, but opportunities remain to grow income across earned, public, and private sources. In 2023, the Board was developed, but compliance work is a continued focus. Following a review in 2024, we have added the fourth objective above to add increased weight and focus to this area of our work.

Actions & Outcomes to Date

- We have grown earned income by 12% from 2019 levels.
- We have increased levels of public subsidy by 35% from 2019 levels with the support of major stakeholders.
- Overall growth in income from 2019 levels is 22%.
- The organisation is fortified with a strong governance structure and robust management systems in place.
- We've the expertise, skill & resilience at Board & executive level to deliver on our strategic ambitions & have seen significant professional development within the team to date.
- We have expanded our team by 2 FTE staff members and established a pension scheme and 3% wage increase.

Work to be Further Focused on 2024-2027:

- We will aim to restore income from fundraising activity to at least €15K by end 2024 with a Giving Strategy in place and a positive outlook for growing this stream.
- Company reserves will reflect a value of 6 months operating funds by end of plan.
- We will formalise a CPD plan for staff and board.
- We will conduct an energy audit on the building to establish needs for greening our space.
- We will avail of Arts Council training and support re: climate policy, and support from Wicklow County Council Energy Unit.
- We will make a plan for futureproofing the building, including adding space and ensuring the building is operating in as environmentally friendly a way as possible, and understand the scale of costs and schedule involved.

Artistic Policy

Mermaid is dedicated to powering creativity in Co. Wicklow.

Mermaid's approach to programming is to present work that is contemporary and/or relevant to audiences and communities in Wicklow. When we say contemporary, we simply mean art that is made by artists living today, rather than implying a particular style.

We show work that helps us understand and enjoy the world as it is today. Our programme is, by necessity and design, a broad church, encompassing the work of brilliant artists whose work ranges the spectrum from upholding tradition all the way to through to breaking entirely with it.

Across our visual art and live performance programmes, and including the priorities highlighted below, we take a particular interest in work that is:

Playful

that blurs lines and boundaries between disciplines, that defies categorisation, doesn't conform easily and is irreverent about form. We love the sense of playfulness and fun that work like this can bring.

Intimate

that pays attention to and is deeply invested in the connection between artist and audience, that thinks about bodies in space together and the extraordinary possibility that offers.

Risky

that takes risks and experiments with ways in which contemporary art is presented through pursuing creative expression, exposing distinct voices, exploring new ideas or piloting developmental concepts.

We programme work at Mermaid for our audiences, to make sure that work has a strong relationship with our local community. Our core programme involves activity that we influence and develop, that directly delivers our artistic policy.

How you can see our policy and priorities in our work:

- We present a diverse & balanced programme including some of the newest and most exciting performance and visual artworks being made today, as well as the foremost artists working in traditional music and storytelling, both in Ireland and internationally.
- We present work that represents all aspects of contemporary art practice, from the challenging to the entertaining and everything in between.
- We engage Mermaid audiences with the work of contemporary artists by creating accessible entry points into exhibitions and artworks.
- We explore new and innovative ways to facilitate access and to encourage audience development and participation.
- We develop community-led activities (e.g. Seascribes; FridayFest).
- We examine and experiment with ways in which contemporary art is presented.
- We act as a pipeline by working with artists and companies during the development of work. This enables us to find ways of engaging audiences alongside and during the creative process, to explore new and innovative ways to facilitate access and to encourage audience development and participation. This pipeline frequently helps to carry artists on to the next step in their career and/or helps an artist find other presenting opportunities and a wider audience for the work.
- We provide an artist-centred approach and curatorial support for emerging and established artists working towards exhibitions and projects in Mermaid.
- We provide opportunities for artists with a Wicklow connection and support their professional development through provision of development space, sometimes financial support, Gap Day, WIP sharing, networking and advocacy.
- We working sustainably by which we mean giving serious consideration to artists' and arts workers' working environment and conditions. Mermaid is guided by the Arts Council's Paying The Artist policy and we ensure artists don't work in or for Mermaid without equitable pay.
- We offer dedicated supports for performance-based artists (e.g. Gap Day).
- We work in partnership with other national and international institutions.



Wider Policy Context

This plan is informed by several important policy frameworks and actions at local, national and international level.

- From Dept. of Arts & Culture: Life Worth Living: The Report of the Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce 2021. Download report [here](#).
- From Dept. of Arts & Culture: Culture 2025. Full policy doc [here](#).
- Project Ireland 2040 National Development Plan ([see p. 70 re: improvement of regional arts infrastructure](#))
- Wicklow County Council Arts Office Strategic Plan. Download report [here](#).
- Arts Council Making Great Art Work Strategic Plan. Full text [here](#).
- Arts Council policies such as [Paying The Artist](#), and [Equality, Human Rights, Diversity](#).
- Arts Council review of Arts Centres 2019. Full text [here](#).
- European Workplan for Culture 2019 – 2022, which articulates actions around sustainability in cultural heritage; Cohesion and well-being; an ecosystem supporting artists, cultural and creative professionals and European content. More detail [here](#).
- The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 2030, which articulate many actions around decent work, equal pay, sustainable communities, climate action and accountable and inclusive institutions. More detail [here](#).

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COUNTY WICKLOW ARTS CENTRE

mermaidartscentre.ie

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