



**11<sup>th</sup> February, 2015.**

**To: The Mayor and Each Member of the Metropolitan District of Limerick**

### **Background**

Limerick City and County Council acquired 69 O'Connell Street in its entirety, which included the original footprint of the Belltable Arts Centre and also the adjacent building, which had been occupied by the Sarsfield Credit Union in September 2010. At that time the Company, Belltable Arts Centre Ltd, that were the operators of the building were in receipt of capital funding for refurbishment, but concurrently the overall funding of the arts in Ireland was coming under severe pressure. By the time the building re-opened in November 2010, the Arts Council had already signalled that they were no longer in a position to fund venues and companies to the extent that they had in the past and that significant changes in both policy and funding programmes would have to be made in response to diminishing resources from Government.

The closure of the Belltable Arts Centre in January 2013 through a liquidation process had a significant impact on the arts community, both locally and nationally. The loss of this key venue, in the heart of Limerick city centre, was a blow to artists and audiences in Limerick City and County in particular, and also to the artists and companies who would have presented work at the venue as part of a national or international tour.

In September 2013, a partnership initiative between the Lime Tree Theatre and the Limerick Arts Office, and The Arts Council, under the name of the Limerick Arts Encounter Programme, was awarded a grant of €120,000 by the Arts Council towards the costs of presenting a range of arts events, including theatre, cinema, visual art, music and comedy, in the former Belltable Arts Centre venue and in city centre locations.

A further grant of €100,000 was awarded by the Arts Council to the Lime Tree Theatre to continue programming both 69 O'Connell Street and the Lime Tree Theatre until 31st March 2015. Limerick City and County Council currently match the Arts Council programming grant of €100,000, to be used for operational costs including utilities.

In February 2014, Limerick City Council commissioned Madeline Boughton and Veronica Coburn to undertake a public consultation process on the future use of 69 O'Connell Street, Limerick. The process was initiated following the Council's acquiring of the building and the liquidation of the Belltable Arts Centre in January 2013. The objective of the process was to identify the best approach to developing and sustaining a vibrant arts organisation in 69 O'Connell Street, that functions as a centrally-located multi-disciplinary arts and culture hub, and which enriches and enhances the existing arts provision within Limerick City and County.

The public consultation took place over eight weeks during March and April of 2014, using a combination of formats and facilitation practices including one to one interviews, a World Cafe style open forum, focus groups and online questionnaires.

From the consultation process, The Belltable holds a unique place in both the hearts and minds of local artists and audiences. The building boasts an enviable location in the centre of Limerick

and is identified in the most recent regional development plan as a “key city centre arts and culture institution.” Although a number of new arts and cultural venues have opened in Limerick and nearby regional centres in recent years (Lime Tree Theatre, Dance Limerick, Ormston House, Limerick Printmakers for example), the loss of a medium scale performance and exhibition space, located in the city centre, it was felt left a vacuum for both emerging and established artists to present work. This loss is particularly felt by artists whose work is in any way avant-garde or risk-taking.

The main points for consideration are:

1. The location of 69 O'Connell Street in a strategic city centre location, in the heart of the Georgian Quarter, contributes significantly to its importance as a unique and important cultural asset. The development of the unified building as an arts and cultural resource for Limerick fulfils all six of the core objectives of the Limerick Integrated Arts Strategy.
2. A new resource paradigm for developing, sustaining and supporting 69 O'Connell Street as a new arts and cultural resource needs to be put in place, taking into account the demands on existing local government resources and the changing policies of key stakeholders including the Arts Council.
3. 69 O'Connell Street is currently programmed up to March 2015 by the Director of the Lime Tree Theatre, under the Limerick Arts Encounter scheme, but this is considered a short term initiative by key stakeholders.
4. The importance of strong governance in the management and operation is central in giving new life to the combined building of the Sarsfield Credit Union and the theatre space at 69 O'Connell Street.

## **Recommendation**

The challenge of reduced funding and the shift by the Arts Council away from supporting theatre production companies to more direct artist support, through the resourcing of hubs and development organisations, necessitates that, if 69 O'Connell Street is to continue as a sustainable arts organisation, a new model is needed which will be both viable and sustainable.

The need for a strong and clear governance structure to be put in place, in order for the new hub to flourish as a sustainable model, was raised as an issue of importance by both stakeholders and members of the arts community during the consultation process. The history of the Belltable in this regard is particularly relevant and every effort should be made to ensure that the new model is sustainable and secure.

Therefore the proposal is the creation of a governance structure, to safeguard the ethos and stability of 69 O'Connell Street as a valuable and unique arts resource for the people of Limerick.

**JOSEPHINE COTTER COUGHLAN**  
**DIRECTOR OF SERVICE**  
**COMMUNITY, LEISURE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES**