Engaging the Public on Climate Change through the Cultural and Creative Sectors

Summary of Report

Photos from An Urgent Enquiry
Top image credit: **Rory O'Byrne, Arts Officer, Fingal County Council**
Bottom image credit: **Brian Cregan**

Background

Climate change is one of the most **pressing social and political challenges** of this generation, and the evidence that climate change and the interrelated challenge of biodiversity loss are happening now is compelling.

Various branches of science are presenting the "scientific facts" of climate change and attitudinal surveys show that the public already cares about climate change, perceives it to be a significant problem and wants action to be taken. However, we are **not yet seeing the desired and required effects** in terms of emission reductions through lifestyle and behaviour change.

One of the challenges of climate change is that it requires **changes or action in almost every aspect of human life**. This means that the phrase "climate action" can describe a myriad of activities either in the form of learning, attitude change or behaviour change.

Global climate change and degrees of warming can also be perceived as **abstract concepts** with limited consequences at a local or personal level, making it challenging to motivate individual actions.

Making climate change a **relatable social and cultural issue** is a crucial part of the overall transition towards a carbon neutral society. Is our culture that shapes how we interact with our environment – through our habits of consumption, ideas about nature, what we value as meaningful, and what we think is possible and impossible. It is also fundamental to how individuals and communities will interpret, accept, and undertake the risks and responses.

The 2019 report, *Engaging the Public on Climate Change through the Cultural and Creative Sectors*, highlighted that **few sectors are better placed than the culture and creative sectors** to bridge the gaps between what we know and feel about climate change, and to critically examine and provoke a shift in cultural values and norms. These sectors are unique in their ability to create spaces for learning, dialogue, deliberation and exploration of climate change, allowing people to visualise what a climate-changed world could actually be like.

Opportunities

Some of these unique opportunities offered by these sectors which emerged from the research included the ability to:

1. **Engage New Audiences** — including audiences that would have been unlikely to seek out information or attend events specific to climate change.

2. **Increase Awareness and Understanding** — moving beyond the presentation of scientific facts through visuals, creative storytelling, metaphors and narratives in a way that does not panic or overwhelm, and that helps people to better understand the scope and scale of the challenge and their capacity to act within their own life.

3. **Explore Different Values and Beliefs** — creative practitioners are often skilled at navigating ambiguity and uncertainty and can help to explore the tensions in existing understandings of climate change.

4. **Create Spaces for Constructive Discussion** — curating necessary and difficult conversations, depolarising the debate on climate change, and building 'spaces of possibility' where people can consider and engage with ideas about the future.

5. **Lead by Example** — by considering environment and climate change in the operational aspects of the sector.

Considerations

A number of areas for consideration were highlighted throughout the research. It was frequently acknowledged that cultural works are usually concerned with **opening or deepening questions** rather than providing answers and solutions. This presents the risk that awareness-raising works could be met with criticism, particularly if they generated a sense of powerlessness among the public in terms of how they personally respond or act on the awareness created.

There may be a perception of "**instrumentalisation**" which could be seen to compromise the creative integrity of practitioners.

There have been very **few evaluations of the impacts** of cultural and creative engagement, particularly on climate knowledge or behaviour change. This may be due to a wide variety of cultural works and the limitations of evaluation methodologies to measure and understand the multifaceted effects of engagement.

Conclusions

The report concluded that there is a **window of opportunity now** as the public is actively interested in climate change and a smaller but growing number of people are undertaking diverse climate actions. Furthermore, there is a growing cultural and creative movement internationally and in Ireland acting on climate change. This presents the opportunity to interrogate everything from funding programmes, creative programming, research initiatives to capital investment.

Ultimately, the challenge of climate change cannot be addressed through policy and technology alone. It is through the **medium of culture and creativity** that the underlying ethical, cultural, political and economic questions will be deliberated on, and that new sustainable values and ways of living will be disseminated.