

Kilkenny Arts Festival Strategy 2024 - 2028

Introduction

For 50 years, Kilkenny Arts Festival (KAF) has been one of the leading multidisciplinary festivals in Ireland, celebrated for its effortless blend of tradition and innovation, and for its electrifying range of events, staged in some of the country's most historic venues. KAF plays a pivotal role in the Kilkenny and national artistic ecosystems. It is a unique opportunity for visitors to experience collaborations and intimate encounters between audiences and artists in the singular surroundings of Ireland's mediaeval city. Kilkenny is unique in the festival ecology in Ireland in that its shape, focus and structure is different every year in terms of artforms and capacities, and therefore defies the usual metrics of year to year comparison.

Our mission as an organisation is to welcome everyone warmly to Kilkenny and encourage them to experience and engage fully with high quality art and creative expression.

This Strategy was developed by the board and executive leadership of the KAF over the course of 2023. It articulates the festival's ambition across the key areas of our operations and our roadmap to achieving our goals over the next five years, 2024 to 2028. It is underpinned by our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and Artist Remuneration policies and our Sustainability statement.

As a group we looked at our artistic programme; how we engage with people and places; our governance, operations and funding; as well as introducing new focus areas; Equality, Diversity and Inclusion; and Sustainability. We have outlined our aim for each of these areas and the objectives and the actions we intend to take over the lifetime of this strategy.

Our Values

KAF is guided by a set of organisational values that have informed this work and how we operate the festival.

Our values

1. We believe in, make, and facilitate high quality art.
2. We enable valuable human connections to be made in Kilkenny between audiences, participants, artists and volunteers.
3. We drive important local, national and international conversations and engage with what's happening in the world around us.
4. We embrace and champion creativity, playfulness and fun with our audiences, artists and volunteers.
5. We are committed to creating an inclusive and welcoming experience where all our audiences, artists, participants and collaborators feel a sense of belonging at KAF.
6. We champion Kilkenny city and county as being integral to the festival experience.

1. Artistic Programme

Our aim for Artistic Programming:

Our ambition is that KAF is an artist-led, multi/trans/inter-disciplinary, and a catalyst festival - with an emphasis on co-productions and collaboration.

Our Objectives:

1. **Valuing artists** – KAF is an artist-led festival, fostering a space, both physical and imaginative, for artists to create & collaborate in Kilkenny, ensuring they feel valued and nurtured. We are committed to:
 - Supporting artists end to end throughout their work
 - Being authentically open and supportive of artists in their work
 - Deliberately incubating work

2. **Multi/trans/inter-disciplinary festival leading with performance** - we balance the strands of programming and art forms over multi year cycles and are rigorous in the analysis of our programme to ensure a range of artforms are well-represented. We are committed to:
 - Prioritising original, curated and devised programming
 - Valuing the process and the outcomes of creating new work equally
 - Programing without fear and with courage

3. **Co-produce, collaborate and host** - put greater emphasis on KAF as a catalyst festival – both with artists in the programme and with our partners with whom we co-produce. We are committed to:
 - Collaborating with partner creative organisations
 - Championing excellence in form and process
 - Where appropriate, engaging additional curatorial expertise

4. **Artist Residency** - the hosting of artists for longer periods over multiple projects/engagements; this allows for the seeding of ideas and conversations that may take longer to develop. We are committed to:
 - Hosting and enveloping Artist Residencies in key programming

5. **Contemporary and relevant** - ensuring that our programme is responding to what's happening in Ireland and further afield, whether it be social, environmental etc. We are committed to:
 - Maintaining a pulse of what's happening in Ireland and the wider world through networking and seeing work
 - Our EDI, Sustainability and Artist Remuneration policies.
 - Giving the audience an authentic experience in Kilkenny that feels 'festivalised'

2. Engaging People and Places

Our aim for Engaging People and Places:

Bring artists, audiences and participants closer together through experiences in Kilkenny.

Our Objectives:

1. **Be a platform for experiences** - connect audiences with artists and artists with artists. We are committed to:
 - Continuing to present work of the highest calibre in a festival setting and maintaining existing audience confidence
 - Presenting work in informal ways in order to foster direct connection and understanding between artists and audience eg Secret Garden / Open House
 - Broadening opportunities for engagement for new audiences through particular programming e.g. Outdoor / Visual & Spectacle
 - Finding ways to ensure that all audiences have access to the fullest festival experience

2. **Kilkenny** - Ensuring that Kilkenny (the city, the county and its citizens) are at the heart of our programme. We are committed to:
 - Affirming a sense of place and people
 - Ensuring that volunteers are mentored and valued
 - Valuing history and the future equally
 - Drawing on people, place, and story for inspiration and co-operation
 - Being provocative with expectations
 - Being proactive about finding and adapting new spaces in which to present work
 - Being opportunistic with interesting and unusual spaces
 - Embracing the challenges presented by reality of limited venues
 - Working dynamically with the risk and limiting effect of accommodation shortage / excessive adaptation costs of existing venues

3. **Create / curate family friendly experiences** - strategically work with appropriate partners to include a programme dedicated to family – this can include activity based / workshop-based programming for children. Additional priority, where possible, in programming for older teenagers / young adults in music, work devised for / inspired by teenage activities, such as Skatepark projects. This strongly links to our junior volunteer programme where we aim to instill a sense of KAF with young people who stay in Kilkenny after school as well as those who leave but who consider Kilkenny home, and may return to live in the City or County. We recognise as priorities:
 - Activity-based arts engagement for younger children
 - Prioritising teenagers in direct programming and where possible targeting audiences in marginalised communities
 - Curating space for everybody that includes children of all ages and abilities for engagement, for example, Light up the Castle, Secret Gardens. Ensuring that neurodiverse families can access programme in an appropriate and tailored way wherever possible
 - Using public spaces

4. **Enhancing local relationships** - Increase the quality and quantity of relationships that we have with local Kilkenny organisations (private, public, not-for-profit). We are committed to:
 - Delivering our annual post festival impact assessment for reporting and marketing purposes - this enables us to share with local stakeholders how the festival positively impacted key sectors of the Kilkenny economy
 - Enhancing and expanding our 'activation' for local businesses/sponsors and friends as a core part of our visitor campaign
5. **Maintain the core and connect at the fringes** - continue to be a festival for audiences with an existing strong interest in the arts, families and also targeting new, currently non-core, audiences to engage. We are committed to:
 - Developing a dedicated approach to messaging how and where each of these audiences are welcomed and encouraged at KAF
 - Developing an approach to connecting with younger audiences
6. **Listen** - be alert and alive to stakeholder engagement throughout every part of KAF. We are committed to:
 - Listening to local business sponsors, funders and stakeholders to help adapt and improve how we engage with them

3. Governance, Operations & Funding

Our aim for Governance, Operations & Funding:

It is our aim to continue to grow KAF's organisational and financial capacity and resilience.

Our Objectives:

1. **Organisational resilience** - make KAF's organisation person-independent. We are committed to:
 - Annually evaluating board composition using the Board Skills Matrix
 - Identifying new areas of focus for the board such as EDI and Sustainability and appoint new members with these skill sets
 - Electing a new Chair of the Board
2. **Clarity of Functions** - develop a clear view of what we believe we need as an organisation in each Executive and Board function. This will enable better organisational continuity and better facilitate best in class hiring practices as the organisation renews itself over the next five years. KAF currently operates across a small number of full time roles, yearly but not full time contract functions, seasonal functions and staff. We are committed to:
 - Define role descriptions, functions and expectations across the Executive and Board
3. **Continuing to build better behaviours** - we will continue to evolve our governance rhythm and policies to ensure we are addressing all areas of this strategy regularly at a board level.

4. **Grow our marketing and communications capacities** - continue to develop the capability to deliver dynamic, responsive, and tailored messaging to a diversity of audiences. Prioritising, resourcing and future proofing out marketing and communications to consistently reach existing and new audiences.
5. **Financial Resilience** - continue to build robust financial reserves for the festival and operate rigorous financial planning according to KAF's Reserves Policy including oversight and control measures via the board's Finance sub-committee.
6. **Diversify sources of income** - continue to seek opportunities to develop additional sources of funding. We are committed to:
 - Identifying new funding opportunities that align with our strategic priorities and those of our partner organisations
 - Proactively update elected representatives on the economic and social impact the festival is making for Kilkenny city and County each year
 - Proactively assess sponsorship function at the end of every festival season to tailor and instigate the next season campaign

4. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)

Our aim for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion:

We recognise the significant positive contribution that an equal, diverse and inclusive board, staff, audience and partners can make to KAF. This diversity ensures a resilient and well governed festival into the future. We are committed to ensuring that our board, as far as possible, represents diverse voices and experiences and reflects diverse genders, ages, social backgrounds, ethnicity and capability.

Our Objectives:

1. **A clear EDI policy** - KAF has an operational EDI policy. We are committed to:
 - Operating this policy for all staff, board, artists, participants and volunteers. (See EDI Policy 2024)
2. **Equal, Inclusive and Diverse Programme** - Be proactive in ensuring our programme is inclusive for all people, regardless of identity, background, or circumstance. We are committed to:
 - A programme that reflects the diversity in society
 - Reaching minority and under-represented communities through the programme
3. **Measuring our impact** - Developing ways to measure and report on our commitment to the principles of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion.
4. **Building capability** - ensuring that our board members, employees and contractors are equipped and trained to advance the board's commitment to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

5. **Continuous improvement** - we are committed to continuous assessment of our EDI commitments. We will hold ourselves accountable for meeting the standards we set to become more diverse. We are committed to:
 - Making EDI a regular part of the board agenda
 - Exploring an EDI board post of responsibility within the board skills matrix
 - Consideration to invite third party EDI auditing to assess the effectiveness of our policy in practice

5. Sustainability

Our aim for Sustainability:

Our ambition is to make KAF a more sustainable festival. This is the start of a concerted effort to be informed and proactive about sustainability. As of early 2023, the KAF Executive Leadership is engaged in a number of initial sustainability initiatives to understand our carbon footprint and explore reduction and offsetting options.

Our Objectives:

1. Understanding the sustainability landscape - in order to achieve our aim of a more sustainable festival we will build on our initial work to understand our environmental impact. We are committed to:
 - Engaging with external consultancy to consider carbon costs and how to offset
 - Exploring practical steps to reduce waste such as reduced printing materials in Marketing and Volunteer Programme
 - Using solar/hybrid generators instead of diesel wherever possible
 - Continuing to work with the Local Authority in accessing public power supply to reduce use of generators
 - Managing the festival infrastructure disposal/ recycled after an event in a sustainable way
 - Continuing to share production and light infrastructure resources with sister festivals (e.g. Carlow Arts Festival, Cork Midsummer Festival) to reduce waste
 - Understanding the implications for travel by artists and strive for less short term hotel use within budgetary constraints
2. **Partnering for sustainability success** - we will work with national and local organisations in the private, public and voluntary sectors to be a more sustainable festival. We are committed to:
 - Exploring how KAF can support national and local government sustainability initiatives as they relate to the arts, the festival ecosystem and tourism
 - Exploring how we can link in with local environmental groups as part of the arts festival - Keep Kilkenny Beautiful etc
3. A **KAF sustainability policy** - we will develop an overall full sustainability statement in 2025 to progress the work in this area to date.
4. **Clearly communicate our sustainability activity** - we will update our stakeholders regularly across audiences, artists, funders and media partners on our activities in this space.

6. Metrics & Measurables

KAF will live and breathe this strategy over five years. In order to drive the strategy, keep the festival on track and help us make the right decisions, measuring and evaluating our performance on a regular basis will be essential. This will be led by the board and the executive and involve our broader network of stakeholders as required.

We are committed to:

1. Regularly assessing, via the executive and the board, that we are living up to our mission as artist-led, multi/trans/inter-disciplinary, and catalyst festival
2. Identifying clear metrics that help us demonstrate we are bringing artists, audiences and participants closer together through experiences in Kilkenny
3. Maintaining and growing KAF's organisational and financial resilience
4. Working hard to grow our EDI capability and communicate clearly to all stakeholders as we learn and make progress during the lifetime of this strategy
5. Developing our full sustainability statement and begin full implementation of it over the lifetime of this strategy

7. Our Desired Outcomes for KAF

We are committed to creating a festival that is:

- **Accessible** - Audiences can easily experience new art forms made to the highest standards
- **Attractive** - consistently high awareness of KAF and it's programme
- **Creative** - Something new and different emerges from nascent collaborations started or fostered at the festival
- **Immersive** - Where artists stay longer alongside festival goers and connect with other artists
- **Inclusive** - we welcome all audiences, participants, artists and employees to participate fully in the festival
- **Sustainable** - the festival is produced in a more sustainable way over time
- **Thought provoking** - Conversations happen about cultural and societal change on contemporary issues at KAF

Kilkenny Arts Festival – Strategy Sub-Committee: Conor McAndrew (P), Emer Foley, Mairead Meagher, Olga Barry.

Facilitator to KAF Board: Dave Dunn

External perspectives: Colette Byrne, former Chief Executive, Kilkenny Arts Festival; Kate Ellis, Artistic Director of Crash Ensemble; Mark Yeoman, Festival Director, Noorderzon Performing Arts Festival, Groningen, Netherlands.

Approved by KAF Board, September, 2024