

# VISUAL

This Strategic Plan was approved by VISUAL's Board of Directors in July 2023. It was devised as part of a two-year process with consultant Janice McAdam In consultation with stakeholders, artists, staff and members of the public. It is currently with a designer, online and In print formats will be published in 2024



## **DRAFT FOREWORD**

When VISUAL opened in September 2009 it was the realisation of a long-held ambition for a dedicated arts centre in Carlow. It was a moment of huge pride for all of us in Carlow, a moment when we, in the second smallest county in Ireland, saw ourselves and were seen differently. In the achievement of a beautiful building, with its magnificent, unique spaces offering such opportunity for artists, participants and audiences, we were visionary and ambitious, confident and progressive, local and of the world.

The years from then to now have not been without challenge for VISUAL and for Carlow, not least in negotiating a global pandemic. However, we held fast to our founding vision of and belief in VISUAL and are immensely proud that it is now known and valued as a pioneering, inspirational, open and social place for art and the people of Carlow and beyond.

Over the course of the next few years, we look forward to VISUAL continuing to contribute imaginatively and meaningfully to people's lives and to the social, economic and educational life of our growing, changing town, county and nation.

We look forward to continuing to provide outstanding artistic experiences that bring people together; to supporting artistic and creative enterprise; to exploring how people see the world and themselves in it; to playing our part in cultural place-making; to being a safe and stimulating environment for children and young people, and those who are disadvantaged or under-represented within our communities, to engage with the arts;

We look forward to achieving the assured support, the human resource capacity and the financial resources to deliver on our ambitions now and to make possible our vision for VISUAL and Carlow in the future.

We have a lot of work to do and the will to do it. This strategy provides the compass and the map.

Kathleen Holohan

Chairperson

## INTRODUCTION

I am very pleased to introduce our new strategy, which confirms VISUAL as a place where people, arts and ideas meet to celebrate and think about the world we share.

Participation in the cultural life of the community and enjoyment of the arts is a human right. This entitlement informs and infuses all that we do in VISUAL. It has shaped our vision: of a world where everyone has the opportunity to think and live creatively; our ambitions for artists; and for the public we serve. Over the next few years, we look forward to advancing the place of the arts in people's lives and to affirming VISUAL as a creative public space for everyone.

Experience of late has taught us that change can come without warning and that creative and cultural spaces have a unique and vital role to play in helping us, to understand change and to navigate uncertainty. We believe VISUAL has a social responsibility to be a safe place for communities and for individuals to gather, reflect and think about what matters to them, and equally to be a place where people can come together and be entertained.

In this context, we have identified three strategic priorities for the coming years. **Art and Ideas** sets out what we will do to create a programme across all of our spaces that will excite audiences, support artists and prompt thinking about the world, while representing the diversity of people and of creative expression in Ireland today.

**Learning and Engagement** is our beating heart. Our work here is vital: essential to who we are as an organisation: the manifestation of what we believe in, and also vibrant and sustaining. We look forward to extending and diversifying the opportunities we create for people to enjoy, socialise and learn through arts experiences. Children and young people, and people from our local communities, will continue to be our priority. They are our present, and our future.

It is consideration of our future that frames our third priority: **Sustainability**. Our iconic building inspires ambition and makes VISUAL original and exciting. However, it also presents considerable organisational challenges. Over the next few years, we must enhance our organisational capacity, capabilities and resources including those that secure a robust, viable financial future for VISUAL.

How we work is as important as what we do. Much of our success to date can be attributed to the culture and values alive and at work in the organisation. We **care** about the future of VISUAL, our community and our planet; we always strive to be **relevant** and responsive to the changing world about us; we are **ready to be radical**, as we work with and for artists, audiences and participants, uncovering new and engaging ways to make and think about art, the world and our future. Most important of all, we make sure VISUAL is an attractive, comfortable place **for everyone**, where all are welcome and anyone can take part.

With this clear intent, I look forward to leading the organisation over the coming years. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Carlow County Council for their sustained support, encouragement, and vision. Their belief in VISUAL now and for the future ensures that we will continue to be a valued, vital resource for the people of Carlow and one of the most exciting places for the arts in Ireland.

Emma Lucy O'Brien, CEO and Artistic Director

## POLICY CONTEXT

VISUAL's strategy sits alongside and responds to a number of national and local strategies.

In relation to the arts, our work seeks to align with the priorities of **Making Great Art Work**, the Arts Council's ten-year strategy (2016 – 2025), principally in relation to artists and public engagement. The Arts Council's goals in this regard are that for artists to be supported to make excellent work that is enjoyed and valued and for more people to enjoy high quality arts experiences.

Other Arts Council policies which have informed our thinking here and will continue to guide our work, include:

- **Place, Space and People Policy**, a new framework for socio-spatial equity in the arts presenting a vision 'for a country where everyone has the opportunity to create, engage with, participate in and enjoy the arts and culture, regardless of who they are or where they live and work'
- **Equality, Human Rights and Diversity Policy** which 'strives to respect, support and ensure the inclusion of all voices and cultures that make up Ireland today, from all sections of society, from existing and new communities, and from all social backgrounds, ethnicities and traditions.'
- **Paying the Artist Policy** promoting 'equitable and fair remuneration and contracting within the arts'.

We look forward to the Arts Council's forthcoming policies on Climate Action and Environment, Digital Arts, Arts Participation, Children and Young People and will respond as appropriate.

More broadly, we also acknowledge **Creative Ireland**, the all-of-government culture and wellbeing programme that 'inspires and transforms people, places and communities through creativity'.

VISUAL supports the ambitions and priorities of Carlow County Council as set out in their County Development Plan (2022 – 2028). The latter puts forward a vision for the county: 'to champion a quality of life through local employment provision, high quality development, healthy placemaking and transformational regeneration, to grow and attract a diverse innovative economy, to support the transition from a linear to a circular economy, and to a low carbon climate resilient environment, to embrace inclusiveness and enhance our natural and built environment for future generations'.

VISUAL also recognises and supports the strategic importance of A Framework for Collaboration, Carlow Framework Agreement 2020- 2027, an agreement between Carlow County Council, the Arts Council and County Management Association. This document sets out 'a shared vision for a new era of arts development, striving for equality of access to and engagement in the arts by all those living in Ireland.'

We recognise the importance and impact of the **South East Technological University** and support its ambition to develop the South East as a UNESCO Learning Region, fostering access and a culture of learning for all.

## WHO WE ARE

Established in 2009, VISUAL is one of Ireland's leading contemporary arts centres. Situated in the heart of Carlow in an architecturally stunning and award-winning building, VISUAL is a place where people, art and ideas meet to celebrate and think about the world that we share.

We present a year-round programme of work in our 330-seat theatre, named after George Bernard Shaw and up to 15 exhibitions per year in our iconic exhibition spaces, which are of a scale unique in Ireland.

Alongside the work we produce or present, we also curate a learning and engagement programme, working closely with local schools, and within our local communities to provide free or affordable opportunities to access and participate in the arts.

Another key aspect of what we do is our developmental work with artists. We commission and support artists across all genres to create work of imagination and distinction, which is relevant locally and resonates nationally and internationally.

VISUAL is governed by a voluntary board of 14 people (including the Chairperson). The work of VISUAL is delivered by a small, talented team of 7 fulltime equivalent staff and 9 casual staff, led by the CEO and Artistic Director, who has overall responsibility for the programming and corporate management of the organisation. VISUAL is a company limited by shares with one shareholder, Carlow County Council.

### **PURPOSE** *(why VISUAL exists and its unique contribution to others)*

**VISUAL is a place where people, art and ideas meet to celebrate and think about the world that we share.**

### **VISION** *(the ideal – in the world – that VISUAL is working towards)*

**We believe in a world where everyone has the opportunity to think and live creatively.**

### **MISSION** *(what VISUAL does to be true to its purpose and vision)*

**We work with others to make and show art from Ireland and around the world that reflects our lives today and inspires our thinking about tomorrow.**

**AMBITION** *(what VISUAL seeks to achieve for itself)*

**Our ambition over the next five years is to affirm our place at the heart of our local community in Carlow and as a centre of national standing, connected with the wider world.**

**We will be a space where artists, makers, creators, individuals, and communities enjoy coming together to share knowledge and experiences and to think in creative ways.**

**We will be renowned for the excellence, innovation and ambition of our programme which is multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary.**

**We will have ensured the future of the organisation by securing the necessary financial resources and by growing our talented team.**

**VALUES** *(what VISUAL stands for)*

We **CARE** about the future of VISUAL, our community and our planet. We are genuinely committed to having a positive influence and impact.

We seek to be **RELEVANT** within this changing world, to the people and to the communities that we serve. We find creative ways to explore what matters to them.

We are **READY TO BE RADICAL**. We ask questions and think about art and the world in new ways. We support and enable others to do so too.

We are **FOR EVERYONE**. We work hard to make VISUAL an attractive, comfortable place where everyone is welcome and anyone can take part.

## STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

Over the period of this strategy we will focus our efforts on the following three areas of work. For each area of strategic priority, a clear goal has been defined. This is what we will work to achieve. We have set out how we will do so, our objectives, and the outcomes we look forward to as we work towards our goals.

### #1 ART AND IDEAS

Goal: An inspiring programme that excites audiences, supports artists and prompts thinking about what matters in our world

### #2 LEARNING AND ENGAGEMENT

Goal: More people across our diverse communities are accessing arts experiences and creatively exploring the world we live in

### #3 SUSTAINABILITY

Goal: We have advanced our long-term sustainability with enhanced organisational capacity, capabilities and resources

As well as these areas of strategic priority, we have identified two key enablers that are critical to the achievement of our ambitions. **Collaboration with partners** and use of **digital technology** will facilitate and support all aspects of our work, extending our reach and impact.

The culture of how we work is as important as what we do. Our values guide the behaviours and attitudes that infuse our work and support our ambitions. They complement and reinforce our belief in **equality, diversity and inclusion** and in **care for the environment**. Every aspect of our work, every decision we make, every element of programme in the coming years will be informed by these principles and elevated by their practice.

## #1 ART AND IDEAS

**GOAL** An inspiring programme that excites audiences, supports artists and prompts thinking about what matters in our world

### Why this goal?

We want VISUAL to be a place where people, art and ideas meet. To achieve this ambition, we must curate a compelling programme that shares the extraordinary ways that art, in all its forms, can amuse, inform, connect, delight and inspire new thinking and learning. In pursuit of this aim, we need to support artists in the creation of work. We must build their professional capacity and encourage their artistic audacity.

Objectives	Outcomes
1. Curate an inviting, quality year-round programme of art and ideas that reflects the diversity of our artists and audiences and that prompts thinking on the big issues of today.	VISUAL is appreciated locally and recognised nationally and internationally for the ambition and relevance of its programme.
2. Curate a programme that animates the GB SHAW Theatre and Bar as a lively entertainment space for the local community, connected to the night-time economy and paying attention to music and community theatre as regional strengths	GB Shaw Theatre is a popular, thriving, live music and performance venue, successfully balancing a programme of commercial and artistic work.
3. Develop a suite of professional development supports for artists at various stages of their careers.	We will have enhanced the confidence and capacity of the artists that we work with, better equipping them to sustain a career in the arts.
4. Commission and support artists and arts companies to create and tour work of scale, imagination, and ambition.	Audacious new work by leading artists is reaching audiences locally, nationally, and internationally.
5. Champion the unique importance of arts centres and add our voice to advocacy efforts on behalf of artists, creative professionals, and the arts sector.	We have contributed to a better understanding of and support for the arts with emphasis on the role of arts centres nationally.



## #2 LEARNING AND ENGAGEMENT

**GOAL** More people across our diverse communities are accessing arts experiences and creatively exploring the world we live in

### Why this goal?

As our population grows and changes, and inequities persist, it is more important than ever that we go out and engage communities of interest and place to ensure equal access to the arts. We want to connect with a greater diversity of people and to create, with and for them, meaningful opportunities to discover and enjoy the arts and to learn through the arts. In particular, we want to hear and amplify the voices and ideas of children and young people and those who may not ordinarily or easily access the arts or creative experiences.

Objectives	Outcomes
6. Further opportunities for people to engage with each other and with what matters to them through the arts.	We have created safe spaces and thoughtful opportunities for people to learn and to be creative.
7. Enrich and extend the creative exchanges we have with children and young people, including their participation in decision-making.	We have empowered a generation of children and young people to engage confidently with the arts.
8. Create innovative pathways for participation to enhance, increase and diversify who we engage with in-person and online.	VISUAL is connecting with a broad range of people in new and meaningful ways.
9. Advance our role as a cultural leader promoting excellence and innovation in learning and engagement through the arts.	VISUAL is regarded as a cultural leader and representative of a region that champions the arts, learning, creativity, and culture.

### #3 SUSTAINABILITY

**GOAL** We have advanced our long-term sustainability with enhanced organisational capacity, capabilities and resources

#### Why this goal?

We want to ensure a vibrant, viable future for VISUAL. As a priority, over the coming years we must secure VISUAL's financial sustainability. We must attend to the policies and practices of exemplary governance and management, and we must invest in people, ensuring we have the structure, culture and capacity to deliver on our ambitions. We must look after our brand and take care of our landmark building, safeguarding our reputation and our home for generations to come.

Objectives	Outcomes
10. Maximise existing funding streams and secure a broader funding base, pursuing funding for core costs as a priority.	VISUAL is financially stable with assured local and national support.
11. Develop the structure and capacity of the organisation to achieve the ambitions of this strategy, making sure VISUAL is a safe, welcoming, and inclusive workspace.	VISUAL is a well-managed organisation with a full-complement of talented staff that reflect the diversity of who we are today.
12. Take care of the team: support personal well-being and professional development and ensure fair remuneration.	VISUAL is a great place to work: it demonstrates its values and enables people to be at their best.
13. Broaden and diversify the profile and skillset of the board of directors, ensuring effective leadership and governance.	VISUAL is an exemplar of good governance, with an appropriately representative board contributing to its success.
14. Maintain the physical infrastructure of VISUAL preserving its status as an iconic building of national significance	VISUAL's building is fit for purpose now and safeguarded for the future.
15. Amplify VISUAL's brand and positioning as an organisation of strategic importance and influence locally, nationally and internationally.	VISUAL is regarded as a centre of excellence, critical to the national arts infrastructure.