



Review of OFFline Animation Residency

A review of effectiveness and impact
2017-2022

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CREATIVE STRATEGIC SOLUTIONS

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OFFLINE FILM FESTIVAL

Clár Éire Ildánach
Creative Ireland
Programme



PIRANHA BAR



Comhairle Chontae Uíbh Fhailí
Offaly County Council



Local
Enterprise
Office

Executive Summary and findings

The [OFFline Animation Residency](#) in Birr is a unique support for animation artists in Ireland. It was established and launched in 2017, and the first Residency commenced in 2018. The Residency offers the opportunity to spend a six-month period in Birr and is managed by OFFline Film Festival which was established in 2010. The Residency also includes opportunities for mentoring and networking, and opportunities for engaging with the local community, particularly with young people.

The Residency was able to go ahead in Birr in 2020 and 2021 despite the constraints and disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

This review of the Offline Animation Residency finds that:

1. The Offline Animation Residency in Birr is effective in providing opportunities and support in a way that is clearly and specifically targeted at animation artists to help them develop their creative and professional practice.
2. The Residency occupies a unique position within the support system for animation artists in Ireland, and there appears to be no directly comparable project aimed at animators within the EU or in Britain. The specific unique attribute is that the project is designed, structured, and managed in a way that is wholly focused on supporting the animation artists in their creative endeavours, free from work or industry pressures and deadlines. In this sense the project captures the essential characteristics of a bursary. For example, bursaries offered by An Chomhairle Ealaíon/Arts Council are designed and resourced to provide artists “[with the time and resources to think, research, reflect and critically engage with their art](#)”. Another critically important element of the project is that it targets and supports animation artists who would not ordinarily be supported (a) in this way and (b) for this purpose by other funding bodies or agencies in Ireland – this confers additional value on the Offline Animation Residency as part of the support system for animation artists and the animation industry in Ireland.
3. The Residency continues to be successful in contributing to the national provision of support for animation artists. National provision in this context includes (a) the funding opportunities and supports provided by [Fís Éireann/Screen Ireland](#), [Éire Ildánach/Creative Ireland](#), [An Chomhairle Ealaíon/Arts Council](#) (b) the arts services provided by the Local Authorities, and (c) the educational and vocational opportunities provided by the third-level education sector.
4. The model that has been developed for the OFFline Animation Residency in Birr is clearly effective and could be adapted, in partnership with OFFline who now have significant expertise in providing this type of support, in other areas. This model should be of interest to Local Authority Arts Services and other agencies in Ireland who have a role to play in developing support structures and opportunities for film, animation, and the visual arts in general. Such an approach could be effective in encouraging complementary diversity of opportunities and supports for animation artists in various locations. This could be explored and developed with advice and direction from OFFline, and this would be a practical and efficient way to enhance and extend the range of different supports available to animation artists using a model that has been tested and evaluated.
5. The project has become established, in a relatively short space of time, as part of the infrastructure of support and opportunities for animation artists; the Residency enjoys a

strongly positive reputation and is well known within its sector primarily by word of mouth among artists and through its promotion by OFFline Film Festival

6. The OFFline Animation Residency in Birr has created a profile, and a network of professional animators associated with Birr, that enhances Birr's reputation and profile as both a destination and a location that can attract animators; in this sense, the Residency makes clear contribution to the County strategy of promoting Offaly as an attractive destination and location for film and the creative industries
7. Birr is considered by participant artists to be a good or an ideal location for the Residency because of its location, its suitability as a place that encourages reflection, as a place that is rich in culture, heritage, arts, science, and environmental amenities, and it is sufficiently accessible yet psychologically 'remote' enough to create just the right conditions for the artists to undertake the Residency
8. There are opportunities, supported by specific suggestions and recommendations by participant artists and other stakeholders, to refine and strengthen the Residency in Birr as part of Offaly's contribution to Ireland's support for animation within the arts and creative industries sectors. These include exploring outreach into schools and other environments for Children and Young People, exploring business development and training opportunities with Offaly Local Enterprise Office, and developing more robust links with animators and the industry internationally
9. There may be opportunities, resources permitting, to test new approaches to aspects of the Offline Animation Residency. For example, to explore the feasibility of extending its footprint throughout the year in terms of number of artists, frequency of rotation of artists, and duration of the Residency, although the six-month duration is considered to be just right by almost all participants to date
10. The Offline Animation Residency in Birr has been effective in creating favourable conditions for the evolution of an informal and valuable network of animators who embody significant knowledge, experience, skill, and contacts. This informal network did not exist in 2017, and it grows and develops with each annual cycle of the Residency in Birr. The nurturing of this cluster of animators has been identified by all stakeholders, including the artists, as an invigorating opportunity for Birr, for Offaly, and for the animation community within the creative industries. This is timely when considered in the strategic context of the continued positioning of Birr and Offaly in the development of animation, film, and the creative industries. It also makes sense to consider the potential of this cluster or network in the context of the Birr Courthouse project moving ahead as a potential centre of gravity or hub or resource to augment and enhance and the cultural infrastructure in Birr as part of Offaly's contribution to national and regional policy objectives in film, creative industries, arts, enterprise, tourism, and employment
11. The artists' experiences of the promotion, management, and overall delivery of the Offline Animation Residency have been positive; participant artists feel that their feedback and suggestions have been taken on board and implemented, where possible, as part of the continuous improvement of the project; the application and selection process are considered to be straightforward, and artists contributed several suggestions for further improvement

12. The written Residency Agreement is clearly written and comprehensive, and provides the right levels of information and assurances for artists
13. Artists were satisfied with the quality of the accommodation, facilities, and equipment; aspects of the mentoring and access to industry connections can be redesigned, in response to feedback from artists, and this is in hand in advance of the 2023 Residency
14. The smooth operation of the Residency, and the development of its potential (including establishing and nurturing links with third level institutions, developing opportunities with the local enterprise sector, and strengthening links with the industry through mentoring and other engagements) relies heavily on the small team at the OFFline Film Festival and on a small group of unpaid volunteers – this is consistent with the arts sector’s reliance on the significant hidden subsidy provided by volunteers and voluntary committees. The development and security of the Residency, and the benefits that it creates for artists, for Birr, for Offaly, and for the animation sector, would be enhanced if funding could be secured to enable OFFline Film Festival assign more personnel, time, and resources to the Residency and to maintain the planned strategic development of the project.

About the OFFline Animation Residency

The goal of the OFFline Animation Residency is to facilitate the animators to produce work that they would normally be inhibited from producing due to time and space constraints, and to remove distractions so that animators can focus on their passion project.

To create these favourable conditions for animators, the Animation Residency is designed and resourced to provide animation artists with a support package that includes:

- unconditional time
- accommodation in Birr, including utilities (heating, electricity, waste management)
- financial support
- access to space, equipment, and facilities
- access to industry expertise and mentoring
- opportunities to engage with the local community, particularly with young people.

The Residency was established with several purposes in mind:

- To support animation artists
- To contribute to the development of Birr as a destination and/or location for animators and professionals in the creative industries
- To contribute to Birr’s position and reputation as a creative place, and to add to social, cultural, and economic life in Birr
- To support Offaly County Council’s ambitions for establishing Offaly as a significant element in Ireland’s infrastructure for film and animation
- To enrich and enhance the programme of OFFline Film Festival by developing a new programming strand devoted to animation.

Since 2018, eleven animators have taken part in the Offline Animation Residency:

2018	Jack O'Shea Matt Horan aka Dashiell Silva
2019	Carolina Larsson Keith Kavanagh
2020	Clíona Noonan Conor McNally Jack McHugh
2021	Éabha Bortolozzo Jack Kirwan
2022	Eoin O'Kane Joe Loftus

Background to this review

Following the completion in 2022 of the fifth cycle of the OFFline Animation Residency, the principal stakeholders – Birr 2020 Vision CLG, the JVM Trench Will Trust, Offaly County Council, and OFFline Film Festival – agreed to commission a review of the effectiveness of the Animation Residency with reference to:

- a. Benefits to animation artists
- b. Benefits to Birr
- c. Contribution to Offaly's development strategy for film
- d. Contribution to the animation sector in Ireland

Methodology

A mixed methodology was used which included research, consultation, and analysis.

The research strand (November 2022-January 2023) involved examination of extensive documentation provided by OFFline, and of documents published by [Offaly Arts Office](#); a consideration of local and regional policy, and support frameworks, including [Film Offaly](#), [Offaly Local Enterprise Office](#), and [Offaly Creative Ireland Programme](#); the research also considered national priorities and policies as set out by [Fís Éireann/Screen Ireland](#) and [An Chomhairle Ealaíon/Arts Council](#).

The consultation strand (November 2022-January 2023) included more than five hours of interviews with animation artists who had completed the residency; interviews with funders and other stakeholders; and a group discussion in January 2023 involving almost all the animation artists together with representatives from Trench Trust, Offaly Arts Office, Offaly Local Enterprise Office, OFFline Film Festival, and Nicky Gogan (Piranha Bar).

The January 2023 group discussion was informed by the output of the consultation interviews that had taken place in November-December 2022.

The analysis of the outputs from the interviews, and the examination of the relevant documentation and policy context at local and national level has informed the content and conclusions of this review.

Context and evolution of the OFFline Animation Residency (2016-)

Several factors helped to create the conditions for the establishment of the OFFline Animation Residency in Birr. These include:

- the establishment of Birr 2020 Vision CLG as part of the community response in Birr to abolition by the Government in 2014 of Town Councils, and as a vehicle to express and pursue the local community's ambitions and hopes
- the social, environmental, and economic impacts arising from the winding down of Bord na Móna activity in Offaly
- the identification of animation as an example of a high-value, technical, and non-destructive industry that could contribute to cultural, social, and economic wellbeing in Birr if the appropriate business opportunity could be created – the OFFline Animation Residency was created to provide that opportunity
- the opportunities created by the arrival of the ILOFAR project housed at Birr Castle which brought Super High-Speed broadband into Birr,
- the opportunities and potential associated with the redevelopment of the Birr Courthouse building as a resource of hub for the creative industries and the arts in Birr.

The original proposition by the OFFline Film Festival to establish the OFFline Animation Residency in Birr captures the sense of ambition, potential and opportunity for Birr, for Offaly, and for the animation sector nationally. The following extract from the announcement of the establishment of the Residency clearly conveys this ambition:

“The arrival of the ILOFAR project to be housed at Birr Castle will see the introduction of Super High Speed Broadband making Birr a very attractive location for media production companies, as they will be able to utilise this unique facility to transfer visual materials at unprecedented speeds. Plans are afoot with local groups, including Birr 2020, to harness this new attribute and the creation of an Animation Residency in Birr is in an early stage of development. The Residency will be a sustainable project that will contribute to Birr becoming an Animation Hub in the Irish Midlands.

Applications from Animation Graduates will be accepted from January 2017 and a small number of selected participants will begin a 3-month Residency in July 2017, with the creative work produced during the term of the Residency screening to an international audience at OFFline Film Festival 2017.

OFFline 2016 will for the first time include a separate screening and prize for Best Animation and this new strand will attract animators from all over the world to attend this year's Festival. The teams behind animated films selected for screening will be invited to join us for Festival week and their accommodation will be subsidised. They will also be able to avail of a courtesy car to collect them from and return them to Dublin Airport. This attractive package will strongly encourage them to take up our invitation, as we have seen in 2014 and 2015.

OFFline's expanded focus on Animation will develop a whole new audience for future Festivals. This project will have benefits for the Festival, for the locality and for the Irish Animation industry.”

With five cycles of the Offline Animation Residency now complete, it seems beyond doubt that the Residency is now an established, and well regarded, part of Ireland's support infrastructure for animation. The design and delivery of the Residency in Birr is highly regarded by participating artists, and it seems reasonable to assert that the Offline Animation Residency has created an effective and impactful response to specific gaps in the support system for animators.

Alignment with national and local arts strategy and policy

The Residency is a form of direct support to artists and it aligns with the first goal of [Making Great Art Work](#), the 10-year strategy of An Chomhairle Ealaíon/Arts Council which is that **"Artists are supported to make excellent work which is enjoyed and valued"**.

The structure of the Residency, the way it is delivered, and the various resources and supports that it provides also align with the objectives that underpin this high-level goal of An Chomhairle Ealaíon/Arts Council:

- *Ensure artists are supported at key stages in the life cycle of their careers*
- *Ensure a supportive working environment that addresses key points in the creative cycle by which art is made*
- *Advance the living and working conditions of artists*
- *Recognise the value of international practice and relationships and support those who pursue such opportunities*
- *Value and support artists working in a broad range of contexts*

The 2022 report [Skills Gaps in the Irish Animation Sector](#) published by Screen Ireland provides an overview of this segment of the industry, and touches on the regional spread of activity that supports the development of animation in Ireland:

"Local Irish animation demonstrated an increase of 27% in production in 2021, after a decade of rapid growth that culminated in a phenomenal surge in 2019, when the sector quadrupled in size and accounted for almost 50% of all production activity. According to the most recent figures available, Irish studios employ more than two thousand staff. The ambition is to double the value of the sector again in the next five years and to increase the numbers working in the industry by up to 50%."

There is a good regional spread of members with numerous studios in Dublin, regional hubs in Galway and Kilkenny, as well as individual studios in Clare, Cork, Louth, Offaly and Roscommon. Studios in Northern Ireland will be joining Animation Ireland in 2022."

The recommendations of this report point to the need for greater collaboration between the sector and the universities, and the need to reduce isolation within the sector.

The potential for collaboration involving the network of animators involved in the OFFline Animation Residency with universities and third level education institutions also arose at the roundtable meeting in January 2023.

The County Offaly [Arts Strategy 2018-2022 Inspire-Imagine-Involve](#) is built around the themes of People, Place, and Process. The theme of **Process** refers to "nurturing artistic talent and supporting creative endeavour" and the strategy refers to the role that residencies can play in supporting artists in Offaly:

"...the broader economic context and gaps in infrastructure continue to challenge artists and those working the creative industries in their efforts to build a sustainable career path. Through the implementation of this strategy the arts office will support artists to connect with new audiences through residencies, bursary awards and exchange programmes. It will also support and encourage artists at different stages in their careers in the development of their creative practice through professional development opportunities and business mentoring to assist them to become more sustainable."

Alongside the Offaly Arts Strategy, the [Offaly Local Enterprise Office](#) (Offaly LEO) can provide support and resources to encourage entrepreneurship at local level. The response from Offaly LEO to the OFFline Animation Residency in Birr has been positive, identifying the potential to develop a cluster of animation practitioners in Birr, and pointing to the value of the network of animators that now exists directly as a result of the OFFline Animation Residency. In the context of the development of the Birr Courthouse, and the potential for regional hubs in the creative industries, this input from Offaly LEO underlines the strategic and developmental value of the Offline Animation Residency in Birr.

Findings from consultation with animation artists and others

The consultation strand that informs this review included a series of interviews with ten animators, and with funders and other stakeholders. The interviews were held by telephone and online and were structured in a way that gave respondents an opportunity to talk about their experiences of, and perspectives on, the OFFline Animation Residency in Birr.

All interviews were treated as confidential and non-attributable.

The interviews explored the following topics:

- **The artists' experience:** awareness of the Residency; the application process; the lived experience of the residency in Birr; the benefits (tangible and intangible) of the Residency; suggestions for change or improvement.
- **The artists' ideas:** how could the Residency be more effective? Is there potential to develop the Residency in Birr? What needs to happen?
- **Funders and stakeholders' views and expectations** for the Residency: benefits and impacts for Birr, and for Offaly; opportunities to develop and grow; areas to change or improve.

The perspectives of the artists gave a clear picture of the range of benefits and opportunities, and touched on the possibilities for growth and development in Birr:

1. The main benefit is having time, space, and freedom to devote to a project away from work deadlines and work environments

2. The duration of the Residency is just about right
3. The Residency is now seen as part of the support infrastructure for animators in Ireland, it has a good reputation, and artists now hear about it primarily through word of mouth
4. It is worth considering ways of extending the footprint of the Residency throughout the year, perhaps by scheduling things differently, or by increasing the number of residency periods, or by some other design approach – the aim being to build a year-round presence in Birr that continues to address the needs of animators
5. Birr offers a good environment and location, there is a sense of being somewhere different and special, there is a creative environment, a sense of heritage and culture, it's a walkable, sociable place that can feel 'far away' yet is accessible and connected
6. The association with OFFline Film Festival adds value to the Residency
7. The Residency feels like a natural organic development in Birr, it feels like it belongs in Birr
8. The community engagement programme is valuable and is worth developing as a way to encourage more diverse participation in animation and to create opportunities for transferring knowledge and experience into the local community
9. The network of past participants is a valuable resource
10. The mentoring strand can be refined and developed, perhaps at an earlier stage in the residency
11. Accommodation, work facilities, and equipment are good, and have improved year-on-year
12. The stipend/allowance is welcome and appreciated, and it is seen as a modest contribution to living costs
13. Support is available when needed
14. The Residency is unique within the animation sector and the support structures for animators in Ireland; the artists emphasised the fact that it is artist-focused, and that this underlines its value as a creative support for animators
15. The Residency fills a gap and meets needs that animators have for unconditional time and creative freedom in a supportive artist-centred environment
16. The idea of the Residency as 'setting seeds' for the future in Birr makes sense, the Residency proves what can be done to address gaps, and creates the possibility of developing something on a year-round basis, or even developing a hub or 'centre of gravity' for animation – the challenge now is to create a critical mass of activity in Birr

The perspectives of the funders and other stakeholders give a sense of how the OFFline Residency in Birr responds to local priorities:

1. The Residency has been successful in demonstrating both the need for, and feasibility of, this form of direct support for animation artists
2. The Residency establishes Birr as a viable and sustainable location for the Residency
3. Having the OFFline Animation Residency in Birr adds value to Offaly's range of supports, resources, and opportunities for the creative industries
4. Birr benefits from the influx of talent that the Residency brings to the town
5. The Residency has created a new network, and the potential to develop a cluster, of animation and related activity in Birr – this type of potential for enterprise development is of interest to Offaly LEO
6. There are potential opportunities and synergies to explore with the development of the Birr Courthouse
7. Can the OFFline Animation Residency 'spread its wings' and create similar opportunities elsewhere in Offaly? Would this be a good thing? What are the pros and cons of this idea?

8. The OFFline Animation Residency attracts and supports animators from all parts of Ireland and is open to international artists – is there scope to prioritise Offaly artists, or to develop opportunities specifically for artists from or based in Offaly?
9. Can OFFline provide materials to help funders and stakeholders promote the impact of the Residency more effectively as they advocate for the project as an important established element in Offaly’s support for film and the creative industries?
10. Are there opportunities for OFFline to engage with the third-level education sector to explore opportunities there?

Conclusions

This OFFline Animation Residency in Birr has been successful and effective in achieving its aims for animation artists, for Birr, and for Offaly.

Based on the findings of the consultation with participating artists, the Residency is seen as a uniquely valuable opportunity and support for animation artists, and its design and delivery are commended.

The design and delivery of the Residency continue to be refined and developed, and the organisers are currently looking at ways of improving the mentoring strand and the community engagement strand for 2023 and beyond.

As a result of the Residency, there now exists a network of animation artists – industry professionals – who have a strong association with Birr, and who have ideas and enthusiasm for developing Birr’s position within the animation and creative industries sector.

Such development will take time, and will involve dialogue and cooperation with funders and other supporters, policy makers, public bodies, other arts organisations, community organisations, industry figures, and the growing population of animation artists.

The ongoing redevelopment of the Birr Courthouse building needs to be part of the agenda for this dialogue and cooperation, as do the potential to develop the industry mentoring strand, the community engagement strand, and the possibilities for extending the presence of the Residency in Birr.

Based on the evidence of the roundtable meeting with artists and stakeholders held in Dublin in January 2023 as part of the consultation process for this review, it seems clear that there is a strong sense of common purpose, supported by institutional goodwill, to see the Offline Animation Residency in Birr continue. The Residency is clearly an effective device that serves animation artists, promotes Birr and Offaly, and is a unique element of how the County supports the development and growth of the creative industries in Offaly.

I wish to thank all who contributed to this review: the animation artists, OFFLINE Film Festival, Trench Trust, Offaly Arts Office, Offaly LEO, An Chomhairle Ealaíon/Arts Council, Piranha Bar, and Éire Ildánach/Creative Ireland.



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