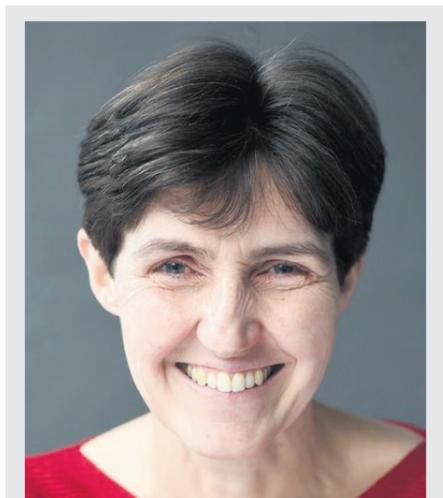


## OPINION

# Government initiatives to promote wellbeing must recognise the impact music can have on Islanders' health

More action is needed from the new Assembly to ensure more spaces, support and recognition for Jersey's thriving arts scene



**Annette Blanchet**

**W**HILE we gear up for the election on Wednesday, the UK recently headed to their own polls to vote for local councils. In conjunction with this, Making Music, an organisation which represents more than 3,800 musical groups, published some thoughts about the arts which voters might consider when grilling their candidates on the doorstep or expressing a preference at the ballot box.

Following the adoption of the Arts Strategy, our Island finds itself in a better position than in the past with a commitment from our politicians that, from this year, 1% of government expenditure will be used within the culture, arts and heritage sectors.

As Jerry Maguire would say, they have shown us the money. However, this funding alone will not ensure success, nor does it necessarily show in itself a full commitment to the arts on the part of the States; this will only be evidenced by their actions over the next few years.

Early discussions within the Creative Island Partnership, the cross-sector body supporting the implementation of the Arts Strategy, are encouraging. The range and diversity of arts represented within the group is huge, as are the backgrounds of those involved.

It is reassuring to know that there is consultation with those who 'do' whichever particular artform they represent at whatever standard. However, without genuine engagement and support from political champions within the Assembly, the strategy will become a lost opportunity and the funding simply a tick-box exercise.

The thoughts of Making Music are that we should demand three things from our politicians: consideration of spaces for music making, support for music makers and recognition of music's value.

The first of these – spaces – could not be more timely, given the current funding crisis of our Opera House and the loss of Fort Regent as a performance venue. Both are of crucial importance to the wider cultural life of the Island and their loss,

albeit hopefully temporarily, is to be mourned. Without them it is simply not possible for Islanders to enjoy truly large-scale events, nor for the Island to host a full range of world-class performances.

However, for many local groups these venues are not the key to their activities; their primary need is affordable rehearsal and studio space. Flexible purpose-built creative spaces are sorely lacking, and we are fortunate that many educational establishments and other institutions so freely open up their premises to accommodate the multitude of groups which meet each evening.

Support for music makers can be shown in many ways and, despite the generous funding commitment underlying the Arts Strategy, need not only be financial. During lockdown, when studios started to evidence that singing could resume safely, the response of politicians to the Jersey Music Association's calls for questions in the Assembly was mixed.

Some were extremely supportive, others unresponsive, despite the severe impact the restrictions were having on those affected.

While the circumstances may have been unprecedented, we elect politicians to represent the electorate on the issues that matter most to us, not those that simply matter to them.

Even if they do not directly appreciate the arts themselves, they should still have an understanding of their importance and the many aspects of Island life that they can so positively influence.

Just as music is part of daily popular culture, so it must be part of daily political culture. Debates within the States Assembly on topics such as education should consider not just the core curriculum, but also the opportunities our young children have to engage with music and the arts.

Government initiatives to promote well-



*For every Island musician*

■ Politicians must provide more support for arts organisations like the Jersey Music Association

being should recognise the contribution that music and the arts can make to our social, emotional and mental health. Whether we are observers or participants, culture touches every part of our day-to-day lives and, as such, is an integral part of the landscape against which our elected representatives make decisions. It should not be debated in isolation.

A further way in which our politicians can support music in the Island is through active encouragement, such as removing some of the barriers to live music.

The number of venues which afford those trying to make a living from music an opportunity to play is, we are told, decreasing due to prohibitive licensing costs and processes.

Outside of these venues, our streets seem sadly bereft of the colour and atmosphere which buskers can bring.

Amateur groups like those I am involved with are often faced with creating their own opportunities to perform, with the only performing arts festival open to all being the Jersey Eisteddfod. It receives no government funding yet can attract hundreds of local participants across all art forms and all ages.

Our government, and the politicians within it, are ideally placed not just to protect the future of existing festivals and events, but also to encourage the development of new ones, accessible to amateur and professional musicians alike.

Islanders who find cost a barrier to culturally enriching travel can now apply

to the Rivington Fund for a grant. This offers the opportunity for life-changing experiences to those who wish to further develop their interest in the arts, crafts or history.

This is to be applauded; however, it must be hoped that some of the skills and enthusiasm the travel inspires are fed back into the local community.

Too often our young artistic talent is forced to leave the Island because they are unable to make a sufficient living. Just as those who support the arts appreciate they must pay for it, so must those in government, providing financial support where necessary and understanding without question the economic benefits of a thriving arts sector.

There are understandably many important issues being discussed in the run-up to the election. However, should you find yourself in conversation with a candidate, alongside asking questions about housing, the cost of living, and immigration, quiz them about the arts.

Whether it's access to music lessons for your children, funding for music-in-healthcare therapy for your parents, or simply your own experience of the difference music has made to your life, it is only by highlighting these things that we can hope to see them recognised and addressed politically.

As the pile of election leaflets pushed through the letterbox gets bigger, I look forward to seeing how many doorstep canvassers refer to the arts. I suspect it may not be many.

■ Annette Blanchet is a member and treasurer of the Jersey Music Association.

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