

Dance Ireland Research Project

Executive Summary

Our strategy identifies the artist and public engagement as its two governing and inter-dependent priorities and further selects particular agendas within those domains. For us, being strategic involves being selective. Our new investment framework will require change by all involved in the funding relationships that we broker on behalf of the public. Change and renewal are the focus of this strategy. We will work with our partners to achieve change in the arts sector but we know that the change must begin with ourselves: with what we choose to do and how we choose to do it. (The Arts Council, 2015)

Governed by a non-executive Board, Dance Ireland is in receipt of annual funding from The Arts Council and Dublin City Council, as well as receiving support for its international programme from Culture Ireland and Creative Europe 2014 - 2020. In addition, the organisation has established a range of partnerships and collaborations with over 29 Irish and international bodies, agencies and programmes, with additional earned income from membership, classes and studio hires contributing to the overall turnover.

As one of Dance Ireland's primary stakeholders, the publication of The Arts Councils new strategy outlines the shift in their priorities for investment in the arts sector over the next ten years. Based around five priority areas – The Artist, Public Engagement, Investment Strategy, Spatial and Demographic Planning and Developing Capacity – the new strategy will be implemented through a series of three year plans, the first of which will be for the period 2017 to 2019. This will see the creation of new models of investment by the Council, including the restructuring of existing schemes and awards, as well as the development of new grant programmes. Supporting initiatives and projects which increase public participation and engagement with the arts, particularly those for whom access to the arts is difficult, is a pillar of the new plan. There is potential for Dance Ireland to find meaningful points of connection with each and all of the new priority areas, with several of the outcomes of this research also tying in with the new priorities.

The issues and concerns of the members which surface in the online survey are mirrored and amplified in the comments and reflections of the focus group and conversations with colleagues and practitioners, which were undertaken as part of this research. How to ensure sustainability, the challenge of remaining relevant and finding ways to engage and attract audiences in a highly competitive and densely populated cultural ecosystem are recurring issues for both artists and resource organisations.

Undoubtedly, individual artists and arts organisations have been severely affected by significant funding cuts and the implementation of strategic policy changes by funding support agencies in recent years. Although resource organisations such as Dance Ireland have continued to receive and, in some cases, increase support in recent years, there are clear signals that this may change as the new strategic priorities are put in place. While there is a belief that artists and the arts sector are immensely resilient and they have

survived one of the deepest recessions in recent history, there is also a weariness and a tiredness throughout the sector. The impact of funding cuts and the move to project funding has created a massive sense of insecurity within the sector and although artists have proven to be incredibly resourceful in finding ways to create work, this has come at a cost.

There is a challenge for resource organisations with a national remit to operate fully as national agencies. This is a particular concern for those agencies such as Dance Ireland, the Irish Writers Centre and Poetry Ireland, the latter having recently taken up the lease on the former Fingal City Council offices on Parnell Square. Finding ways to engage and support artists, not just outside Dublin but outside the building, is an important priority for all resource organisations. The value of having a dedicated outreach position within the senior management team, with specific responsibility for building engagement programmes with local and regional artists and audiences, is seen as a vital mechanism for creating links and connections with communities outside the confines of a building.

Handling the competing demands of managing and operating a busy fully functioning facility in Dublin with the equally important role of developing programmes and initiatives to support artists is a constant source of stress and tension within organisations. This is particularly acute for those who are operating with limited human and financial resources. It is worth noting that Dance Base in Edinburgh, a custom-built dance facility which opened in 2001 with four studios, a café and meeting area as well as offices, has a full-time staff of 18, not including front of house and cleaning staff. 8 of the staff are directly involved in the artistic, outreach or communications side of the organisation's work, which may go some way towards explaining the significant numbers (over 2,500 a week) who attend the venue. It is important for organisations who, like Dance Ireland, have taken on the responsibilities and opportunities of managing an artist facility, to not be confined or restrained by a building. But rather to find ways in which the building, in this case DanceHouse, is just one instrument through which the organisation delivers on its mission to nurture and support dance artists.

The subject of advocacy for artists and art forms and the lobbying of arts policy, funding and development agencies is a particularly important issue for members of Dance Ireland and one which is approached differently by each of the resource organisations consulted in this research. While there is a broad agreement that promoting the role, importance and value of artists is vital, it is not seen as a core objective but rather as a subtext to the work of resource organisations. The example of *Words Ireland* was mentioned as a positive model of an art form partnership between seven literature organisations who work collaboratively to provide coordinated professional development and resource services to the literature sector, and who collectively can advocate and lobby for the art form. However, it must be noted that for individual artists, and Dance Ireland members in particular, the need for a body, agency or organisation to advocate for them and the needs of dance in Ireland was one of their most urgent priorities and many look to Dance Ireland to fulfil that role.

Managing the expectations of the membership and the sector for whom it represents is a constant predicament for resource organisations. It is particularly the case for

organisations such as Dance Ireland where the day to day operation of DanceHouse is hugely labour intensive. When combined with the needs of the membership for the organisation to extend its reach outside Dublin, while also taking on an advocacy role on behalf of the sector, it becomes apparent that either significant resources need to be put in place or careful consideration must be given to setting out clear priorities.

The challenging environment facing the arts in Ireland and the significant reductions in funding in recent years has resulted in a higher risk for artists to finance and produce new work. The role of Dance Ireland and DanceHouse in supporting the creation of work is greatly acknowledged as is the sense of pride and privilege for dance artists to have such a high quality resource available to them. However, there is also a clear need from the sector for more opportunities to share finished work through the development of a national venue network, a possible production hub at DanceHouse and the support of an experienced producer to work with artists in order to generate further opportunities.

There is recognition from the membership that, over the last twelve months in particular, Dance Ireland has embarked upon a genuine process of engagement with them in order to elicit their feedback and rebuild trust. This is very much appreciated and there is a desire that this openness and sharing of ideas and opinions is a very positive step in building a stronger sense of community within the sector. The role of Dance Ireland as a powerful advocate for the sector, working with and on behalf of the dance community, is seen to be one of the important and distinctive strengths of dance in Ireland.

The importance of maintaining a culture of openness between Dance Ireland and the dance sector, with regular opportunities for dialogue and exchanges of ideas and feedback, is regarded as extremely valuable if dance in Ireland is to continue to thrive. The extending of this spirit of openness into the building and facilities, both for the existing members and also to encourage new and diverse communities and audiences into DanceHouse, is vital for the membership. This was a recurring issue across the spectrum of responses and demonstrated the desire of the members to see Dance Ireland and DanceHouse not just as the bricks and mortar of their spiritual home but also a holistic space where they feel welcome, nurtured and supported. For members, community is a shared space, where conversations and collaborations can happen easily over a cup of coffee, in addition to the existing more structured initiatives and projects developed by Dance Ireland.

The success of Dance Ireland's recent inaugural *Perchance to Dream* Conference in December 2016 is a clear indication of the importance of creating an opportunity for members and the wider dance and arts community to meet and share ideas, information and inspiration. While appreciating the importance of the sector integrating with other art forms at events such as the annual All Ireland Performing Arts Conference, there is huge value to be gained for the dance sector having its own dedicated event, an indication of the confidence and distinctiveness of the art form. In addition to the event becoming an annual meeting point for the sector, it might also be worth considering extending the Conference outside Dublin in order to build and maintain strong links with those artists and communities working in relative isolation in the regions.