



## An Integrated Dance Strategy 2010-2012

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# 1 Introduction

In June 2008, the Arts Council concluded its midterm Review of *Partnership for the Arts*. With regard to dance, the Council identified the need to continue work undertaken during the first period of the plan (2006-2008) and to adjust some priorities over the remainder of the plan (2009-2010). A number of ideas were considered, including new policy priority areas; specific new initiatives; and new advocacy actions.

This paper outlines how the Arts Council intends to build on the June 2008 position, and offers a more developed and integrated overview of how the Council envisages dance provision in the future. In the spirit of *Partnership for the Arts*, many of these ideas have been informed and tested by discussion with dance artists and organisations. Feedback from these ongoing discussions contributed directly to the shaping of the ideas here.

This paper is also written against the backdrop of recent radical changes in the funding environment and in the knowledge therefore that the available financial resources will diminish in the short to medium term. The Arts Council recognises the need to adapt its policy priorities in order to respond effectively to the altered circumstances.

The following sections outline the principal elements of the Arts Council's updated dance strategy for 2010-2012, looking at:

- policy aims
- core policy areas
- special policy areas

## 2 Policy aims

Despite the fact that dance development has been somewhat limited by a shortage of essential infrastructural supports, dance is an integral component of the Irish cultural landscape. Besides having spawned a broad base of talented artists, the sector's success is also rooted in widespread and popular participative dance practice. As a consequence, dance has rapidly emerged as one of the most widely practised artforms in Ireland. A growing number of people of all ages and social status attend the numerous dance classes that have spread across the country from urban centres to rural communities.

There is now both an opportunity and an imperative to build on the positive elements of the existing framework while seeding the conditions for future developments. To succeed in this, it is important to utilise scarce resources as effectively as possible.

The Arts Council's new approach can be summarised in the form of integrated policy priorities which aim to address future challenges and opportunities:<sup>1</sup>

- Consolidate programmes initiated since 2006 as part of *Partnership for the Arts*. In particular, continue to strengthen the infrastructural supports and resources available to individuals and organisations.
- Increase the scope and capacity of support available to practitioners within the dance sector. Assist in developing strategically located service providers and/or resource organisations, with a view to providing stable points of reference for future policy-driven initiatives.
- Ensure a more balanced geographical distribution of dance activities and support across Ireland. Address gaps in geographical coverage and support existing activity in regional centres. The approach should take account of the need to establish and maintain relationships between these centres and Dublin, where activity is currently concentrated.
- Reaffirm the value of artistic excellence while taking account of other key indicators of achievement in the artform: high production standards; critical recognition; national and international profile; participation in established dance platforms; and the capacity to create connections with national and international partners.
- Develop a more sustainable practice by encouraging existing companies to streamline their programmes to focus on their core strengths. Where relevant, ring-fence funding to companies which demonstrate significant expertise in specialist areas such as education, outreach, participation and professional development.
- Encourage an entrepreneurial culture within the dance sector, based on fair contractual relationships between organisations and individuals.
- Raise awareness of the specific psychophysical issues pertaining to professional dance practice.

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<sup>1</sup> Some of these priorities for Dance naturally overlap with priorities for other Arts Council policy areas, particularly Local Authorities, Arts Participation, and Young People, Children and Education.

- Form closer partnerships and synergies with local authorities, with the double purpose of (i) stabilising working conditions for independent dance artists and (ii) enhancing the participatory components of dance across the country.
- Promote innovative formats of programming and production, in particular encouraging practice based on sharing resources, seeking funds from multiple sources and implementing sustainable models.

### 3 Core policy areas

The Arts Council's dance strategy covers five core policy areas. The people and organisations represented by these areas are the essential building blocks for realising the overall policy aims outlined in section 2 above. The five core areas are:

- resource and service organisations
- production companies
- independent dance artists
- audience development platforms
- education and vocational training

#### 3.1 Resource and service organisations

In order to establish a long-term legacy for the dance sector, it is essential to coordinate the development of a number of strategically located resource organisations. These organisations can provide the essential infrastructure required to sustain stable programmes of support for artists and deliver ongoing services to the wider community. Furthermore, an integrated network of geographically well-positioned organisations can assist the Arts Council in delivering on its overall policy aims and objectives for dance. First and foremost, existing services should receive continued support. Thereafter, any new developments should focus on providing complementary services, resources and/or facilities.

In line with good practice, we propose that the following key principles should guide organisations providing dance and choreographic services:

- Focus: support should be provided for programmes that provide a platform to support innovation and excellence in dance research and development.
- Artistic positioning: the service provider should remain artistically 'neutral', thereby ensuring that a number of different approaches and aesthetics can be supported through its programmes.
- Impartiality: selection and decision-making processes for the distribution of funds or allocation of resources should be objective.
- Accountability: funding should only be used to create programmes that are clearly consistent with the organisation's mission and resources; furthermore, it should be possible to assess the artistic and financial basis of these programmes independently of the organisation's ongoing administrative activities (any contribution towards core organisational costs should be minimal).
- Transparency: funding should be used to support activities which benefit the national dance sector via clearly identifiable and discrete activities; any form of direct support to individual artists should be publicly disclosed.
- Sustainability: programmes should be designed with cumulative impact in mind, and with a view to long-term development; over time, programmes of this type could conceivably be provided by other organisations with similar resources.

## 3.2 Production companies

Production companies are important players in the development of dance in Ireland. Besides creating artistic work for national audiences and fulfilling the role of ambassadors for Irish dance abroad, they can provide the expertise for artform development programmes. It is therefore essential that the Arts Council continues to support companies that have a proven track record of innovative artistic vision, high production standards, solid employment practices and commitment to the development of dance. It is equally important to recognise the centrality of artistic production in artist-led dance companies, enabling artists to give form to their vision through high-quality artistic work.

Where production companies have diversified into offering additional services (e.g. community work, open dance classes, mentoring programmes, commissions and residencies), the Council will take an overview of the value of these services. As an outcome, funding will become more targeted and encourage best practice in the diversification of programmes. This approach will complement the policy for resource and service organisations outlined at 3.1 above, thereby generating an increased synergy with and between the services offered by these organisations.

## 3.3 Independent dance artists

In recent years, the independent dance artist has emerged as a mainstream professional figure in Ireland and in many other European countries. There are currently a substantial number of independent dance artists based in Ireland, many of whom are well established and of international renown.

Operating independently of a company structure, and therefore having the flexibility to respond to a range of opportunities, projects and local needs, this type of artist is already involved in dance practice in different ways. Their involvement can range from choreography and performance to multidisciplinary collaborations, events, lecturing and teaching. Given their mobility and flexibility, they have the potential to play a key role in decentralising dance activities to regional centres. By definition, funding support to these artists is likely to contribute towards the direct costs of artistic creation, with minimal administrative costs.

The Arts Council ought to continue to support independent dance practice through its funding programmes, acknowledging the important role that these artists play in the development of dance in Ireland. Funding instruments should be continuously refined to ensure that artists can avail of suitable support.

## 3.4 Audience development platforms

*A Future for Arts Touring in Ireland 2010-2015* (2008), the report of the Touring Experiment, clearly indicates that audience development is crucial to the advancement of dance in Ireland. There is evidence that presenting dance within a recurring platform (e.g. venue programmes or festivals) greatly enhances the quantity and quality of interaction with the audience. Specialised events - such as small festivals, forums, symposia, dance seasons, screenings and curated events - create the conditions for targeting and reaching out to diverse audiences; they also create employment and

networking opportunities for artists. An increase in the number of such platforms would greatly enhance the potential of future touring activities, as they would offer stable points of reference and some marketing and production assistance.

While the Arts Council directly or indirectly supports a number of events that present dance in Ireland,<sup>2</sup> the Dublin Dance Festival (formerly International Dance Festival of Ireland) is currently the only annually recurring dance platform in the country. The lack of other established initiatives represents an obvious anomaly. In particular, the absence of a *national* dance festival represents a serious gap in provision.

Building on the example of Dublin Dance Festival as the premier dance platform in Ireland, the Arts Council will consider prioritising the development and consolidation of other collaborative initiatives aimed at showcasing dance and facilitating national and international networking. In an environment of scarce resources, we will prioritise recurring events, created via partnerships based on sharing available resources and/or capable of attracting funding from a range of sources, over once-off events.

### 3.5 Dance education and vocational training

For many years, it has been recognised that the lack of proper provision for dance education and training is a barrier to the development of the artform in Ireland. Serious gaps in the formal dance education system continue to drive young dancers abroad to further their studies. Despite the absence of systemic provision, the professional sector continues to respond to demand via open dance classes (available in locations across the country), mentoring programmes (e.g. Daghdha, Dance Ireland), youth companies (e.g. in Limerick, Dublin, Tralee, Wexford and Longford) and private academies (e.g. in Cork and Dublin).

While education is outside the Arts Council's direct remit, the Council will continue to advocate for the provision of comprehensive dance education; seek broadly based partnerships with educational institutions; engage with the Department of Education and Science where appropriate; and support high-quality programmes that contribute to dance education and training.

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<sup>2</sup> Examples of such dance platforms in recent years have included Temple Bar Diversions Festival, Vibrate Dance Festival, Mamuska Nights, Mediated Bodies, Sionna Festival, Dublin Fringe Festival, Galway Arts Festival and Longford Dance Festival.



## 4 Special policy areas

The Arts Council's strategy also covers three more specific areas:

- building-based infrastructure
- professional ballet
- touring

### 4.1 Building-based infrastructure

Given that the human body is central to dance practice, clean, safe, warm and secure studio space is a minimum requirement for dance artists to engage with their artform. As physical wear and tear and serious injuries are among the specific issues affecting professional dancers and choreographers, it is vital to ensure the provision of well-serviced studios that comply with the requirements of the practice. It is also important that these spaces are made available and affordable to dance artists at all stages of their career, from student to professional level, balancing their needs with those of dance production companies.

In 2007, Dance House in Dublin began operating as a custom-built space with six studios. This building, which was supported by a capital grant from the Arts Council, has set the baseline standard for dance rehearsal space in Ireland and should help to inform similar enterprises throughout the country in the future.

To ascertain the level of building-based infrastructure available to the dance sector and to explore the potential for future capital investments, the Arts Council initiated a policy framework in 2008 called *Giving Body to Dance*. An independent research project was carried out in 2009<sup>3</sup> whose aims were to:

- form a detailed map of current building-based dance infrastructures in Ireland and assess their standards
- analyse available support in relation to the level of funded dance activities and the real needs of the sector
- create a knowledge base from which to inform future policy on building-based development in dance
- establish standards of best practice across the artform for dance spaces

*Giving Body to Dance* is a good foundation from which to work towards strengthening the quality and availability of such resources nationwide and creating a roadmap for future infrastructural development in dance, in conjunction with public and/or private bodies.

### 4.2 Professional ballet

In May 2006 the Arts Council commissioned Derek Purnell (dance expert and former chief executive of the Birmingham Royal Ballet) to conduct an independent review of

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<sup>3</sup> The Arts Council published a summary of the review findings in February 2010 (*Giving Body to Dance: A Review of Building-based Dance Infrastructure in Ireland*).

the context and issues affecting professional ballet in Ireland. Taking account of the historical context, the process involved consultation with national stakeholders and a survey of existing infrastructure and related supports.

The findings were collated in a policy paper entitled *Towards a Strategy of Support for Professional Ballet in Ireland*, which the Council published in 2007. The policy paper (which has become known as the Purnell Report) acknowledged ballet as an integral part of cultural life and its importance to the development of many forms of professional dance. The document set forth a number of recommendations for developing the artform in Ireland, indicating, among other things, that:

- future Arts Council funding of ballet companies should be part of a strategy of building on existing provision
- a specific 'ballet development fund' should be established to foster innovation and creativity in ballet
- the ballet sector should focus on developing a collective voice in pursuit of common interests with the rest of the dance sector

In response to the Purnell Report, the Council initiated a three-year development programme in partnership with the relevant ballet organisations, which commenced in 2008. During a mid-point review of this process, we identified a number of challenges, including:

- Resources: effective action is hampered by the shortage of resources (both financial and human) within the Arts Council to realistically oversee the implementation of national development plans and/or to play a leading role within the ballet sector
- Absence of formal indigenous training: while this factor affects dance generally, it is particularly relevant in ballet because of its highly technical training requirements
- Lack of suitable performance spaces: in particular, a scarcity of the type of large stage required for public ballet performances

### 4.3 Touring

Dance companies are faced with real challenges when trying to present their work within a traditional touring framework. Given the shortage of infrastructural supports and specialised platforms for the public presentation of dance, the current approach to touring displays over-reliance on a cash-driven model based on the availability of liquid assets (as opposed to being rooted in established production networks).<sup>4</sup>

Touring is also very costly for dance companies as it is difficult to secure reasonable guarantees/fees and shared box office deals from venues. Moreover, most shows are presented as part of a multidisciplinary seasonal or monthly programme that leaves little scope for targeted marketing initiatives.

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<sup>4</sup> Typically the cash-driven model includes (i) fixed costs, such as fees to dancers, per-diems, travel to location, accommodation and marketing material; and (ii) additional costs, such as venue hire, additional technical support and transport of a 'dance floor'.

A three-pronged strategy is envisaged:

- shift the focus from the product (show) to the people (audience)
- strengthen the context in which touring takes place
- foster the creation and consolidation of national dance networks that rely on stable local partnerships

The rationale for this approach is supported by compelling evidence. Both the Touring Experiment and feedback from the sector have clearly indicated that audiences in an area can improve greatly when key elements are in place - for instance, a dance artist in residence working within a local authority; a commitment to promoting dance through curated platforms;<sup>5</sup> or participatory events centred on local venues.

The strengths of dance as an inherently participative artform have not yet been fully utilised, despite the willingness of production companies to engage in building audiences through workshops. No formal research has yet been undertaken on the extent and range of private dance classes and activities in Ireland, but there is strong anecdotal evidence that dance rates highly among artforms practised at a community and amateur level. Taking dance classes is a common recreational activity, particularly for young people, and these dance participants also become the audiences for touring productions.

In response to the challenges and opportunities facing touring, the Arts Council will introduce three practical measures, subject to available resources:

1. provide new touring-focused support to directly develop touring and networking initiatives
2. consolidate strategic touring 'nodes' across the country by developing partnerships with local authorities in order to stabilise and provide better support for dance artist in residence programmes
3. support the emergence of sustainable dance platforms for touring artists and companies by exploring ways of differentiating how dance is contextualised and experienced and expanding opportunities for interaction with a wider audience.

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, dance seasons, informal platforms, forums, showcases.