



Linking Serving Strengthening
dance in Northern Ireland

Dance Resource Base

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Response to Programme for Government Framework 2016 – 2021 Consultation

About Dance Resource Base

Dance Resource Base (DRB) exists to support the dance community in Northern Ireland and is the only such organisation working across all styles and types of dance. DRB provides facilities, resources and services for people involved in dance, as well as playing an advocacy role in raising the profile of the art form. As part of our remit, we are committed to acting collaboratively with like-minded partners to nurture the development of dance artists, increase audiences at dance performances and build participation in dance activities across Northern Ireland. We believe that this is the best way to get everyone dancing!

As a membership organisation, DRB maintains a comprehensive directory of dance professionals in Northern Ireland, including dancers, choreographers, teachers and facilitators, health professionals, arts organisations, educational institutions, as well as members of the public interested in dance.

Through our activities and members, DRB advocates for excellence, diversity and accessibility in dance provision throughout Northern Ireland.

Overview

Dance Resource Base welcomes the Executive's move to embrace a more outcomes-based approach to the directing of government activity and public investment in Northern Ireland. In relation to the draft of the Programme for Government (PfG) currently open for consultation, we would make the following comments:

1. More consultation is required with non-government organisations operating at the programme and project levels about how best to implement this approach;
2. Consideration should be given to connecting the cultural participation indicator to additional Outcomes, especially Outcome 4 relating to long, healthy, active lives; and
3. Consideration should be given to embracing a multiplicity of quantitative and qualitative measures for progress in relation to the cultural participation indicator (Indicator 27).

Finally, DRB would strongly support the position that adequate levels of public investment in the arts is vital to being able to achieve any progress against the admirable Outcomes set out in this draft PfG.

General Comments

Dance Resource Base welcomes the focus on long-term and collaborative solutions to communal issues as set out in this draft Programme for Government and in particular the focus on ensuring that considerations of effectiveness of public investment are to be guided by the real impact made to the lives of the people of Northern Ireland. We applaud the commitment to more cohesive working across government to ensure more joined up approaches and working in partnership. This is consistent with the approach that DRB already takes to the delivery of our own activity as a leading organisation within the arts sector as evidenced by our joint dance sector projects and our ongoing, collaborative relationship with other arts development organisations.

This said, we have a number of general concerns about the way in which a more outcomes-based approach has been translated into this document as well as some substantive changes we would like to see made in relation to how “cultural participation” is viewed in the document.

1. Impact of an OBA™ at the programme or project level and focus on using a single, quantitative lead measure

While we understand that more detail about how this new outcomes-based approach will be fleshed out in the action plans that follow, from an organisation in receipt of public funding from Arts Council of Northern Ireland, we would welcome more information and discussion about how this new approach will affect organisations like ours at the programme or project level. If we are to adapt and change our working practices or the way that we measure or evaluate their impact, that will put an additional financial and resource burden on organisations that are already struggling with funding cuts. We would encourage government and their agencies to adopt a collaborative approach to working with organisations like ours on how this new approach might work in practice and provide space for such organisations to make the changes that might be necessary.

In addition, we are concerned that the government’s embrace of one particular outcomes focussed approach, that of OBA™, is too prescriptive and doesn’t take into account the variety

of ways in which the monitoring and measuring of impact can be achieved. We are also concerned that this document only discusses using a single lead measure for each indicator of progress towards an outcome and that this lead measure is generally quantitative in nature. This seems to run contrary to the sentiments expressed early in the document about why the Executive is moving towards an outcomes focus, that is, that it will allow for a multiplicity of and more coordinated approaches by Government to complex and overlapping social problems. A reliance then on simple quantitative measures seems to do the opposite of this and risks measurements that will in effect focus on outputs and not any impact that they have. As an arts development organisation that supports dance professionals rather than delivering dance activity directly to the public, we would be concerned that using this measure alone to determine success may not take into account the importance of the infrastructural skeleton that sits below direct delivery and supports continued delivery. As a result, we would support Community Evaluation Northern Ireland's recommendation that "a pluralist approach to evaluation where a range of methods suited to particular needs and contexts are adopted in order to reflect contributions and impacts of locally-based community organisations on individuals and communities".

DRB is currently part of a collective impact evaluation project in relation to the arts sector in Northern Ireland, along with Arts & Business NI, Audiences NI, Theatre NI and Voluntary Arts Ireland. We would welcome government engagement with this project so that we can collectively and collaboratively develop approaches that will have the impact that we all seek.

2. Limited use of the 'cultural participation' indicator in relation to Outcomes

DRB believes that the arts have a role to play delivering on all of the outcomes set out in this draft PfG. From our perspective then the most perplexing failure to include this indicator is in relation to Outcome 4 – We enjoy long, healthy, active lives. As a result, we would ask the Executive to give serious consideration to making this change in the final document.

The arts in general have been recognised in a wide variety of studies and, indeed, elsewhere in this draft PfG for its contribution to the health and wellbeing of those who engage with it. In the case of dance, this is particularly so. It is no mistake that currently dance seems to be everywhere, both in popular culture and policy agenda aimed at improving communal good

health and wellbeing. Dance is a non-competitive, highly social, creatively stimulating and fun physical activity. Participating in dance offers numerous benefits that specifically address urgent public policy concerns including:

- Gaining healthier hearts and lungs and stronger muscles and bones to address growing poor physical health due to poverty and economic inequalities and more sedentary lifestyles;
- Increasing physical confidence and social interaction skills to address social exclusion and isolation;
- Stimulating creativity and the imagination to inspire individuals to develop confidence and discover new talents and strengths to help them and their communities thrive; and
- Offering appealing physical activity options to groups that shy from competitive sport like younger women, older people and ethnic minorities.

A growing body of research links arts and cultural participation and attendance to good health and wellbeing. Many of these benefits have been collated and set out comprehensively in Arts Council England's 2014 evidence review, *The Value of Arts and Culture to People and Society*¹. In relation to health and wellbeing, DRB would like to draw particular attention to that report's notes on the following:

- "... engagement in structured arts and culture improves the cognitive abilities of children and young people" and has a positive impact on specific health conditions including dementia, depression and Parkinson's disease. Dance in particular shows benefits " ... for reducing loneliness and alleviating depression and anxiety among people in social care environments. Dance has the ability to promote creativity and social integration and allow nonverbal stimulation and communication" (p. 26);
- "... a mixed method study into the effects of dance on people with Parkinson's disease used qualitative interviews to explore the link between dance and its benefits and found that the value of dance was that it was 'multi-layered' and provided stimulation – not just physical, but emotional, intellectual and social" (p. 27);
- "The benefits of dance in relation to the prevention of falls were also evidenced. Alongside evidenced benefits related to particular conditions, overall physical improvements include increased cardio vascular, strength and flexibility and improved

¹ See full report at <http://bit.ly/29RBAmn>

balance and gait ... The physical benefits when contrasted with sports or other exercises are bolstered by the social and creative aspects which can enhance overall wellbeing. Dance activities create a sense of community and can help counter feelings of isolation. [Studies further] ... demonstrate the benefits of freedom of expression and identity, learning new skills, gaining a sense of achievement through creating a performance and having an opportunity to dress up and counter the invisibility many older people experience on the streets. The evidence appears to indicate that individual and cultural interests play a key part in driving older people to dance. [Dance is also attractive because it encourages engagement in] ... inclusive and non-competitive activities” (p.29).

On the basis of this and other evidence, we urge the Executive to connect the “Improve cultural participation” indicator to Outcome 4 in the final PfG.

We would also ask that specific consideration be given to including it as an indicator in relation to Outcome 1 – We prosper through a strong, competitive, regionally-balanced economy. Arts professionals develop and run their own creative businesses and thus are an integral part of a strong and vibrant economy.

3. Dangers of viewing cultural participation as a pastime only

DRB have some concerns that this draft PfG seems to only acknowledge the benefits of the arts and dance where they are a fun hobby or pastime to be involved in. Taking this view reinforces the idea that involvement in the arts is the ‘icing on the cake’ of life rather than central to the development of a confident, active and creative population that seems to be imagined as being at the heart of this PfG. It is also a serious career option for particular individuals who demonstrate a high level of skill and ability and allowing for the development of those talents can bring enormous rewards to society as a whole.

This often means allowing an artist to express their creativity in their own way, to value their cultural expression as individuals connected to their community in the widest possible sense, and not just where they are reflecting a particular cultural viewpoint. If we truly value diversity then we must invest in, develop, encourage and provide appropriate platforms for

them to do so. In so doing, we will find the challenge, innovation, experimentation, creativity and change that we say we value. These actions might then inspire, provoke and challenge others to do the same.

Particular Comments

Outcomes

Outcome 5 – We are an innovative, creative society where people can fulfil their potential

Dance Resource Base welcomes the commitment to “encouraging and assisting people to reach their full potential in a wide variety of ways”. In relation to creativity being valued and encouraged and innovation fostered in the cultural sector, we support such statements while hoping that this embracing of innovation is not always demonstrated in the pursuit of the ‘new’ at the expense of maintaining the infrastructure (both physical and organisational) that has allowed and continues to allow the cultural sector to survive and thrive.

We applaud the commitment by the Executive to “promoting the benefits of cultural and creative activities”. Dance Resource Base is keen to work with the Executive to do this. As an organisation involved in developing the skills and building the confidence of dance professionals in Northern Ireland, we welcome support for this in the draft PfG. Highly skilled, confident and empathetic arts professionals are essential to the delivery of high quality, diverse and accessible dance activity. Investment in ensuring this is welcomed.

We commend the commitment to the education and training of individuals to “develop their full potential”. We draw to your attention the impact of funding cuts in the last few years on the delivery of specialist, post-secondary dance training in Northern Ireland with the loss of both the dance degree programme at the University of Ulster and the dance diploma courses at Belfast Metropolitan College. This has left Northern Ireland without any such training. Talented young people are now leaving Northern Ireland in order to gain this training with the very real likelihood of not returning once they do. If the Executive is committed to

enabling all young people in Northern Ireland to develop to their full potential, this training gap will need to be addressed.

Likewise, the lack of such specialist dance training within primary and secondary education (rather than an element of physical education) will also hamper achievement of this outcome. Only two schools in Northern Ireland currently offer dance to the end of secondary schooling. The availability of this training in schools improves the accessibility of such training for talented young people who would otherwise have to rely on private provision that may be unaffordable.

Teachers and facilitators must first be highly proficient in the activity before they can teach it. A specialist course allows training in a number of different styles of dance. Our 2014 Belfast Dance Participation Survey² found that most dance teachers were not able to make a full-time career teaching without being proficient in, and able to teach, a number of different styles. This is a key advantage of specialist, post-secondary training in that they can develop these skills and improve the sustainability of their creative businesses. They also receive particular training in anatomy and body mechanics that are necessary to keep them and their participants safe and injury-free. This training is not usually part of a generalist performing arts training course. Artists and art form teachers and facilitators are required to be as well trained as any other professional. You would not employ a doctor or a lawyer without such training. The same expectations should be applied to dance provision.

Dance Resource Base welcomes the opportunity to partner with the Executive to work towards achieving this outcome.

Outcome 9 – We are a shared society that respects diversity

We fully endorse the pursuit of a society that “promotes mutual respect and understanding, is strengthened by diversity and where cultural expression is celebrated and embraced”.

Dance Resource Base is supportive of the right for all to creative and cultural expression and to a diversity of expression. Dance is a key component of many cultures and traditions. DRB

² Full report can be found here - <http://bit.ly/29YJcTP>

members come from a variety of cultural backgrounds and provide a variety of dance activity reflecting these backgrounds. Participating in dance reflective of these diverse cultural backgrounds allows for the development of a greater awareness and understanding of both cultural diversity and human commonalities encouraging social cohesion.

Dance Resource Base welcomes the opportunity to partner with the Executive to work towards achieving this outcome.

Outcome 10 – We are a confident, welcoming, outward looking society

In relation to building Northern Ireland's place on the international stage, Dance Resource Base is keen to play its role and believes in the soft power of the arts to write the new narrative of what Northern Ireland is and who its people are. But in order to be able to take that place on the international stage, the art created must be of a high enough standard for overseas venues/festivals and programmers to consider showcasing work from Northern Ireland. Additional investment in developing talent and product that can be sold and marketed overseas will be necessary. Because the investment required can often come with a financial risk, it is often public investment that is most suitable to underwriting this activity and can in turn attract private investment. If successful, this can bring 'hard' financial returns as well as the 'soft' cultural returns of remaking the Northern Ireland 'brand'.

In the past, Dance Resource Base used funding from the Creative Industries Innovation Fund to mount such a project of introducing dance from Northern Ireland at British Dance Edition 2014, the UK's most significant showcase for dance. This project proved a successful launch pad for several of the companies to begin to secure international interest in their work. The Executive should consider reintroducing a similar fund to support these kinds of projects.

Dance Resource Base welcomes the opportunity to partner with the Executive to work towards achieving this outcome.

Outcome 12 – We have created a place where people want to live and work, to visit and invest.

We note here our earlier comments regarding the lack of post-secondary dance training in Northern Ireland and its importance to keeping talented young people in Northern Ireland.

Failure to do so is a statement to those young people talented in dance that we do not value them or the contribution that they make to their home through using the skills and talents that they have.

We would reiterate to the Executive the importance of trained professionals to being able to deliver on their aim to increase “quality of life by supporting culture, the arts and facilities for recreation”. You need the artists here to be able to continue to do this, and they need to be highly skilled if any push for engagement is to be successful. If a person’s initial experience with the arts is not excellent, then there is a risk of turning them off that activity for life. The odds of this happening are much greater when you have not invested in ensuring that the provider of that activity is skilled and experienced enough to make it a valuable experience.

In addition, one of the key concerns outlined by dance professionals in our 2014 Belfast Dance Participation Survey³ was the lack of affordable, suitable venues from which to offer dance activity. Dance is one of those activities that has certain physical requirements in order to be undertaken safely. There are various reports setting out these requirements⁴. The lack of suitable spaces for dance in Northern Ireland is a serious barrier to delivery of the activity. In addition, given the very tight profit margins in providing activity, there are very real concerns in ensuring the space that is available is affordable. While new spaces are welcome, we would encourage investigation into more affordable options that might look at reconfiguring and refitting currently available and unused spaces eg. those vacated by retail for long term use.

Dance Resource Base welcomes the opportunity to partner with the Executive to work towards achieving this outcome.

³ See report here - <http://bit.ly/29YJcTP>

⁴ *Giving Body to Dance: Review of building based dance infrastructure in Ireland* (2010) and Equity and Dance UK’s recent *Fit to Dance Space Charter* (2016).

Indicators

Indicator 27 – Improve cultural participation

Lead Measure: % engaging with arts/cultural activities in the past year

We commend the inclusion of an indicator on cultural participation in the draft PfG and make two observations. One, that the choice of “improve” and not increase encourages us to hope that there might be emphasis given to considering other aspects of “cultural participation” beyond simply taking part. And, two, that this measure appears to have been at a fairly consistent level over the past decade, hovering between 80 and 90%. While it is always a goal to increase that figure, focusing on it alone, that is, on the mere goal of participation alone, misses a real opportunity to provide investment in the sector to do more and thus help achieve a range of outcomes set out in the draft PfG.

In discussing the idea of “improving” cultural participation, we might look at what type of participation people are involved in (Are they taking part or are they engaging as an audience member?), the depth, breadth or intensity of that participation (Is it one-off, once a year or ongoing? Is it across art forms or with different kinds of arts activity?), where did the activity originate (Was the activity engaged with produced in Northern Ireland or outside?) or the standard or quality of the activity (Was it provided by appropriately trained facilitators both in art form and in the context in which it was provided?).

We might ask what other measures might we consider as relevant to track progress in relation to cultural participation that would more accurately demonstrate the complex interactions and ‘impact’ of cultural participation in relation to multiple outcomes. Perhaps some of the following could be considered⁵:

1. For participants

- Access to a range of possibilities for participation in relation to art forms and types of activity;
- Affordability of accessing participation;
- Average household spend on arts or culture;

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- Access that meets any specific needs of the person who wishes to participate;
- Frequency of engagement;
- Diversity of engagement;
- Improved appreciation of and/or satisfaction regarding that engagement;
- Any changes or improvements in life experiences since participation;
- Availability of information relating to activity open to participation; and
- Improvement in public attitudes towards the arts.

2. For Artists/Arts Organisations

- Acquisition of new skills or training in the past year;
- Acquisition of new work opportunities in the past year;
- Level of earnings from your art practice in the past year;
- Number of businesses operating in the creative or cultural industries; and
- Investment in innovative, collaborative delivery of activity within the arts sector or with other sectors.

DRB would welcome the opportunity to work with the Executive to flesh out the cultural participation indicator.