

For
Arts Council of Wales
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WALES DANCE REVIEW

executive summary



National Youth Arts Wales
Photo: Sian Trenberth Photography



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About the researcher

Karen Pimbley is Head of Arts Management at the Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama in Cardiff and works as a freelance arts consultant and researcher. Her extensive dance career includes work with Diversions Dance Company (later National Dance Company Wales) and serving as a director of Welsh Independent Dance. She has experience as an independent producer, served on the Dance Strategy Panel of Arts Council Wales, and produced a feasibility study for a National Centre for Dance in Wales in 1997. In education, she has designed BTEC dance curriculum as a Quality Design Writer for Pearson Education and developed dance courses for multiple institutions. Her doctoral research, documenting professional contemporary dance in Wales from the 1970s onward, is preserved at the National Library of Wales. Karen is currently a trustee of National Youth Arts Wales and maintains a non-partisan approach in all her work and research.

Brief and scope of the review

One of the published outcomes of Arts Council Wales's (ACW) Investment Review 2023 was to commission a review of community dance in Wales. However, following calls from and meetings with the dance sector, the scope of the review was broadened to consider the whole ecology of dance in Wales.

Building on existing sector knowledge, this review provides insight into current issues and the future of dance in Wales and forms part of a range of ACW's Strategic Interventions for dance. It draws on previous stakeholder feedback and considers the Welsh dance sector through:

- field research
- published research
- consideration of success models from both within and without the UK and across various artforms.

The review focuses on the entire dance ecosystem in Wales, including dance production and performance, community dance, dance in education, dance for health, amateur and social dance and commercial dance schools. The report provides an overview of the current state of dance in Wales, explores comparable models to guide potential sector development and offers recommendations for the future of dance in Wales.



While acknowledging the past, the main priority of the review is to consider how dance in Wales can move forward by harnessing the expertise, passion and commitment of those in the sector. The aim is to create a more diverse and equitable environment, enhance health and well-being, promote best practice and recognise the voices of those who have long felt marginalised.

The review captures a moment in time in late 2024 and recognises that conditions are continually changing and evolving. Some issues raised as part of the review may therefore resolve over time without any need for further intervention.

Summary of key findings

Whilst a number of different mechanisms were used to collect data for the review, many reiterated the same or similar issues. The full report breaks findings down into the key research components, but a summary of findings from respondents across all mechanisms is as follows:

Sector Fragmentation & Competition: A competitive ecosystem exists between dance artists due to scarcity of resource that often stifles collaboration and creates a protectionist working environment.


Geographical Disparities: Urban-rural and north-south divides limit access to dance for dance artists and audiences, with rural areas like Pembrokeshire and Powys facing particularly acute challenges.

ACW Funding: Revenue funding from ACW is concentrated in South East Wales, limiting opportunities in other regions. A more equitable, collaborative approach across both Lottery and revenue funding streams was called for. A review of National Dance Company Wales was also suggested.

Community Dance Challenges: Financial instability affects freelance dance artists working in community settings across Wales. There were numerous calls for hub development to assist with resource and good practice sharing, providing sustainability. This developed into the idea of co-located artform hubs across Wales to enable dance to be integrated with other artforms. A focus would be on outreach to under-served communities and fostering of cross-artform collaboration. Intersecting with findings from the review of English language theatre will be beneficial.

Siloed and Elitist Practices: The sector is seen as elitist, tokenistic and non-diverse by many respondents – for example, a number of dance artists felt excluded by the established freelance community when moving into Wales and some are left feeling less worthy of support than others.

Infrastructure Needs for Dance Artists: Accessible, affordable studio spaces and resources need to be available for dance artists, including physical (e.g. touring equipment) and non-physical (e.g. support for application completion). Calls for some form of artist-led national dance development agency and dance artist in residence programmes across Wales were apparent.



Performance & Touring Opportunities: Improved partnerships with venues and connection with international organisations, festivals and residencies is needed. A vibrant home programming landscape from large scale down to small studio as well as co-ordination of support for dance touring was called for.

Career Pathways: A lack of structured career pathways for dance artists was apparent - calls for better training, leadership development and career transition support.

Welsh Culture and Language: Many felt there is tokenistic inclusion of Welsh culture and Welsh language in dance. There is a call for greater investment in and recognition of traditional Welsh folk dance forms as being integral to cultural identity. Embedding Welsh language into relevant activity should also be addressed. Intersecting with findings from the review of traditional Welsh music will be beneficial.

Training & Professional Development: Professional development support for dance artists working in education settings, including specialised training in areas such as dance in health and Welsh language engagement and practice.

Wellbeing: Support for mental and physical health as well as fair compensation standards for dance practitioners.

Recommendations

There needs to be change, with sector support and infrastructure development across all areas. The dance sector was described by many as ‘on its knees’ with committed artists working in an incredibly resilient manner to try to shore up a failing system. Without intervention, there is danger of artist burnout, loss of developments already achieved and even complete sector collapse. To achieve a vibrant and sustainable dance culture across Wales, key areas suggested for intervention include the following:

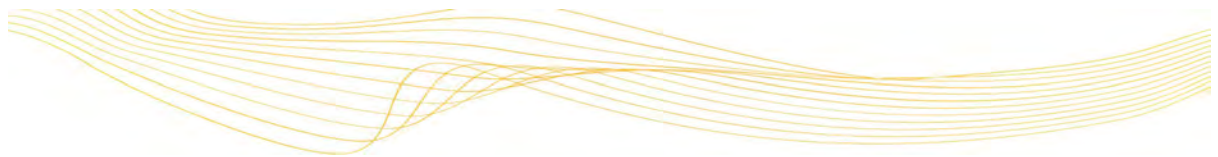
SHORT TERM: immediate, 1-6 months

Recommendation 1: Establishment of an independent and remunerated strategic panel to determine a robust way forward for dance in Wales. This group would be recruited by ACW, be representative of the sector and tasked with:

- Evaluating and prioritising the review’s recommendations requiring immediate and longer term financial support
- Contributing to a comprehensive dance development plan for Wales
- Ensuring co-ordination between immediate interventions and longer-term strategic objectives

Success metrics:

- Implementation of an activity timeline for review’s recommendations
- Identification of projected costs associated for adopted review recommendations



Recommendation 2: Establishment of a critical friend / critical friends bank that can interrogate the practice of revenue funded companies at the highest artistic level. The critical friend role would provide:

- mentorship, guidance and support for Artistic Directors
- foster conversations around practice and programming choices for venues
- consider overall cultural relevance and context to Wales

The role could potentially be extended over time to support smaller companies and freelance artists to challenge and champion their practice

Success metric:

- Appointment of one suitable critical friend within 6-month time period for each revenue funded dance client (different critical friend for each organisation or same if appropriate). Strategic panel (from recommendation 1) to work with companies to shortlist appropriate personnel. Critical friend engaged on a daily fee basis – 1 day per quarter. Suggested daily freelance fee £350

Recommendation 3: Appointment of a dance specialist to ACW Council as there is currently no dance advocate involved in decision making at that strategic level. If the imminent call-out for Council members does not result in a dance specialist appointment from Spring 2025, it is recommended that someone with suitable experience is co-opted/seconded into the role until a more permanent solution is established.

Success metric:

- Interim co-opted/seconded appointment or full Council appointment in early 2025

MEDIUM TERM: 1-3 years

Recommendation 4: Development of a network of co-located community hubs across Wales by leveraging existing organisational infrastructure¹. The strategy would need to maximise existing assets, fostering cross-sector co-operation and development with minimal financial investment and would:

- Enable collaboration across communities and art forms
- Facilitate connections with education, health and business stakeholders
- Minimise additional costs by utilising existing resources and infrastructure
- Create integrated support networks without developing new resources from scratch

NB: development could link with interventions suggested by the separate review of English language theatre in Wales that is currently underway

¹ Example of how this recommendation could work is included as a case study in section 4.2 of the main report



Success metric:

- Development of a costed network of co-located community hubs across Wales - number and locations to be decided by the strategic panel identified in recommendation 1

Recommendation 5: Development of an artist-led national dance development agency for Wales. Informed by the strategic panel identified in recommendation 1, how this would be funded would depend on:

- where it would be based (if a physical base is needed)
- its role in order to be truly pan-Wales
- its role as sector advocate
- how it would link with the existing freelancer network and community hubs
- whether it is designed as a distributed funding model

Success metrics:

Development of a suitable agency model for Wales that:

- embraces digital solutions for geographic challenges
- integrates bilingual and cultural considerations
- builds on the strong regional network of community hubs in recommendation 4
- develops sustainable partnerships
- maintains artist-led principles while adapting to local context

Recommendation 6: It is crucial that arts-based initiatives that have a connection to Welsh language and heritage are supported by arts funding. Focus on developing and strengthening the Welsh language and Welsh culture through dance-related activities to embed language and culture into appropriate interventions. Initiatives should always aim to support and celebrate Wales's cultural heritage and language while locating work firmly within community contexts.


Success metrics:

- Welsh language embedded into dance delivery via suitable projects
- Welsh culture embedded into dance projects and commissions

Recommendation 7: Development of English, Welsh and BSL resources to support dance in the curriculum. Include Welsh choreography and companies on the new GCSE dance syllabus.

Success metric:

- Resources embedded in new GCSE dance curriculum



Recommendation 8: Proposal of a tiered ACW funding approach that simplifies application processes for smaller companies and independent artists. This simplified system should be applied to Investment Review applications, Lottery and other funding streams.

Success metric:

- Application processes simplified for those within and without the multi-year funding portfolio and directly related to the capacity/size of organisation/artist – i.e. administration support available, time required to complete application process if unpaid

LONGER TERM: 3+ years

Recommendation 9: Development of a dance artist in residency (AiR) model across 5 centres in Wales, on a 2-year max tenure at each venue. Brokerage by the strategic panel identified in recommendation 1. Costs are estimated of between £70-£100k per annum per venue – this would provide 1 or 2 full or proportional artist salaries and cover costs. Working in partnership with venues and other stakeholders might enable alternative funding streams to be realised.

Success metrics:

- Identification of venues appropriate for the scheme's development
- 5 AiR programmes set up around Wales on a rolling programme

Recommendation 10: Research the potential of a post-graduate dance training model in conjunction with suitable partner(s)

Success metric:

- Suitable vocationally focused Higher Education institutions to consider producing a feasibility study on the viability of running a multi-pathway industry focused post-graduate MA/MFA programme, working in conjunction with suitable partners

Recommendation 11: Development of a Centre for Advanced Training (CAT) scheme model with bases in North and South Wales – or – negotiate with the England CAT scheme network to secure places for young Wales based dancers nearest to where they live.

Success metric:

- Improved access to high level training across a range of dance genres for young dancers who are hoping to move into professional dance training



Dance sector overall success metrics

- **Infrastructure development**

If all review recommendations are implemented, infrastructure developments would be progressive at key milestones over a ten-year period. To ensure effectiveness, all infrastructure models must be designed to collaborate seamlessly rather than cross over each other's delivery models whilst also working with and building on any future developments across the whole of the performance sector. Working in harmony to become a truly pan-Wales eco-system would naturally require linking mechanisms between the AiR programme, the national development agency and the community hub network. Without this integration, there would be a risk of establishing costly, isolated systems that operate in silos.

- **Equitable distribution of dance funding across Wales**

More equitable funding distribution across Wales would ideally see more revenue clients across the whole of Wales.

- **Professional retention rates**

Evidenced by a decrease in the talent drain from Wales with dancers choosing to return to Wales to work post-training. It would also be evidenced by a freelance dance community that is thriving to the degree that performance opportunities are increased for artists within Wales negating the need to relocate outside of Wales to have a fulfilling career.

- **Community engagement levels**

Evidenced by ACW data showing community engagement levels across Wales remaining strong and/or growing.

- **Career progression rate**

A persistent gap in the 'ladder of opportunity' prevents experienced dancers from advancing their careers. Evidence of success would be via celebration of the experience and knowledge of mid-career artists with each artist able to develop their practice and progress their careers, rather than repeatedly forced back to starting positions due to project-based funding limitations.

- **Audience development levels**

Milestone development over a sustained period of time following specific initiatives from the review's recommendations. Increasing performance opportunities outside of traditional venues.

Overall, future approaches to dance infrastructure development should celebrate Wales's unique potential and focus on rebuilding from the ground up rather than top down, to serve the whole of the sector and the country.

Moving forward, it is recommended that ACW shares the review's findings with the dance sector and other stakeholders for their responses, with a view to actioning the review's findings from summer 2025 onwards.