

2021 REPORT

# Dance Think Tanks Report

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## Overview and Context

In July 2020, Dance Ireland, Dance Limerick and Dublin Dance Festival collaboratively hosted a series of Dance Think Tanks: in-depth conversations with representatives from across the dance sector on the island of Ireland.<sup>1</sup> These Think Tanks were convened both in response to the immediate existential difficulties experienced in the sector following the onset of the global pandemic, and also in response to more long-term, ongoing issues that are of importance to the sector’s survival and sustainability. The Think Tank conversations built upon important discussions that were set in motion across different performing arts sectors during the pandemic, and the aim of the initiative is to take these conversations further for dance.<sup>2</sup> This report synthesises responses from participants across the three Think Tank sessions. It identifies key areas of challenge and opportunity for the sector and makes recommendations for action. The report is intended to inform the design of a shared strategy to support the future development of dance on the island of Ireland.

1. For the purposes of this report, references to the “dance sector” encompasses dance artists based in Ireland and Northern Ireland, as both groups were represented at the Think Tank conversations. This inclusive approach follows the call from Think Tank participants to develop an “all-island dance ecology”, and is also supported by recent developments in the sector towards all-island collaboration and cooperation (e.g. the Co-Motion all-island dance conference in October 2019). However, it must be noted that dance artists from each jurisdiction operate within different infrastructural and resource and funding support systems. This is discussed further in Section 5 of this report.

2. These previous discussions included the “*We need to talk about Dance*” meeting facilitated online by Dance Ireland on 4th June 2020, and the “*Independent Dance and Theatre Artists’ Meeting*” facilitated online by Veronica Dyas, Mags Keohane, Ruairí Ó Donnabháin and Róisín Stack on 25th May 2020.



## Overview and Context

The three Think Tanks addressed different key themes. The first — *‘Making Dance Performance’* — considered the present challenges experienced within the sector in the creation and production of work during the pandemic, and what is needed to provide supportive solutions, in both an immediate and long-term context. A summary of the discussion can be found: [here](#). The second Think Tank — *‘Dance of Interdependence’* — discussed how the overall dance ecology functions across the island of Ireland, examining its existing support structures, networks, processes, and relationships, and how these can be strengthened and further developed. The conversation was opened with a short input from Fearghus Ó Conchúir on the concept of “Interdependence”. A summary of the discussion can be found: [here](#). The third Think Tank — *‘Shaping Sustainability’* — looked at how we can build resilience within the dance sector and support its sustainable development, resilience and growth into the future. A summary of the discussion can be found: [here](#).



## Aims and Methodology

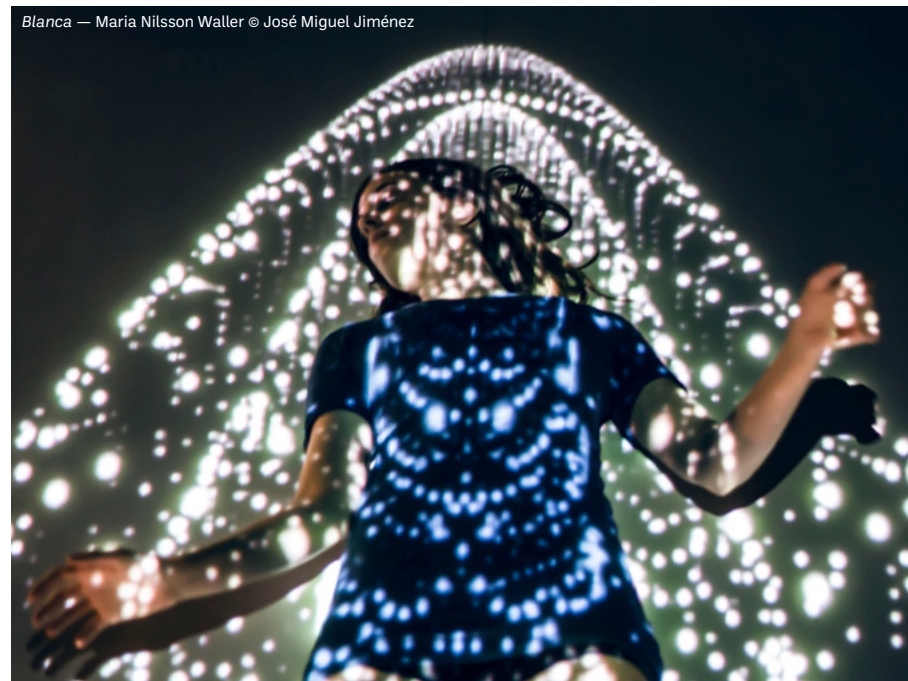
A fundamental remit of the Think Tank initiative is the voicing of dance artists' opinions and concerns. This report represents a collation and analysis of a collectively generated, grassroots response from 29 artists and industry professionals working across the dance sector on the island of Ireland, and all quotations cited in this final report are taken directly from the summaries of the Think Tank meetings. Careful consideration was given to the inclusion of a diverse and wide range of artists operating across different areas of the sector, including representation of: different dance genres (e.g. ballet, contemporary, traditional dance, and street dance); artists working in different geographical locations; different ways of working (e.g. independent dance artists and choreographers, dance educators, and dancers and choreographers working within a company model); and artists at different career stages (e.g. recent graduates, emerging, and established artists). The challenges and recommendations in this report apply to all artists and relevant industry professionals working across all genres. Where an issue is specific to a particular dance genre, career level, or geographical context, this is noted. In addition to dance artists, the Think Tanks also included industry professionals and representatives for organisations within or related to the dance sector (e.g. producers, venue managers, directors of resource organisations, festival directors and managers). Due to the pandemic lockdown restrictions, all conversations were conducted online via Zoom.

The framing themes of each Think Tank conversation were purposefully broad to allow for discussion content to be led by the issues most important to the participants of each Think Tank session. The conversation facilitation and design was responsive and time was provided at the end of each session for participants to offer feedback and suggestions for what needed to be carried forward from the discussion. Participants were given the opportunity to send further thoughts by email relating to both discussion content, and to the Think Tank conversation design and facilitation, and this feedback was incorporated into discussion summaries and/or subsequent Think Tanks, as appropriate. This element of co-design was implemented to allow participants to both shape the questions asked, and help ensure clarity regarding outputs. Each Think Tank summary was then disseminated throughout the dance sector and publicly, and individuals and organisations were invited to respond. These further contributions were also incorporated into this final report.



## Summary Analysis

In the context of the current existential pressures placed on the dance sector by the global pandemic, the questions raised by these Think Tanks highlight the economic precarity experienced by dance artists across the island of Ireland. In outlining the often unsustainable nature of relationships between dance artists and the cultural production systems they work within, this report offers new insight into how the dance ecology on the island functions, and what is needed for its development. It draws attention to the complexity of dance artists' position within the performing arts landscape, and how dance policy and funding schemes need to address this complexity in order to provide effective support. This report calls attention to the inadequate visibility and representation of dance across educational structures and cultural platforms, and a continued inequity in funding provision for dance, both in relation to other performing arts disciplines, and also in relation to the disparity between the two jurisdictions on the island. It also voices the troublingly high stakes experienced by the most vulnerable workers in the dance sector — the dance artists themselves — whose significant levels of both personal sacrifice and hidden labour have become the damaging norm. The dance sector has enormous potential for growth, and the ideas for innovation and sustainable development offered by artists in this report provide an exciting roadmap for the sector's future.



## Funding Themes

The inadequacy of funding support available for dance across the island of Ireland has been repeatedly acknowledged for decades, both in Arts Council reports across both jurisdictions, and in independent, research publications.<sup>3</sup> The view that dance is “critically underfunded” was expressed regularly across all three Think Tanks, and there was a unanimous call for both increased funding and a review of current funding models. There is a continued sense within the sector that systemic inequities in funding provision persist, particularly across performing arts disciplines. The disparity in the levels of funding available for dance in comparison with theatre, for example, was recognised as having an ongoing, detrimental effect on the development of the sector. Lower levels of funding for dance artists curtail their ability to create work with high production values, larger-scale ensemble work, or work with live music. There is an increasing imbalance between the labour required to produce work of a competitively high international standard and the financial support available for sector growth. A general sense that emerged across all three Think Tanks was that artists feel there is a need for funders of dance to be made aware of the “real cost of dance”.

3. This lack of sufficient funding has been highlighted in multiple Irish Arts Council reports, reviews, and strategy and policy documents, stretching back to the first comprehensive report about the professional dance landscape in Ireland, commissioned by the Irish Arts Council and conducted by Peter Brinson in 1985 (*Dancer and the Dance: developing theatre dance in Ireland*). It has also been recently discussed in scholarly publications about the dance sector in Ireland (see, for example, Aoife McGrath and Emma Meehan (eds.), *Dance Matters in Ireland: contemporary dance performance and practice*, Houndmills: Palgrave, 2018).



Minus 16 — Ballet Ireland © Declan English

## Funding Models

Another important thread within discussions about funding highlighted a perceived ineffectiveness of current funding models and cycles. Artists spoke of the threat to sustainability in the sector resulting from the “short-termism” of the current funding models, which leads to dance artists being engaged in a “constant process of being judged on short term, project-to-project outcomes with no sense of accumulation and meaningful or strategic purpose”. Independent dance artists across every career stage communicated their experiences of going into debt to support their careers and highlighted that the Pandemic Unemployment Payment has provided many dance artists with more financial security than they have ever experienced. Even established, regularly-funded dance companies and choreographers communicated having difficulty developing a continuous practice due to constraints imposed by current funding models. Dance companies across the island are essentially operating on a part-time basis and are unable to develop a full-time ensemble, or support the growth of fellow artists within a programme of activities: “even three years [of] regular funding feels really short”.

In addition to the main themes outlined above, there was also agreement across all three Think Tanks that funding models need to be more artist-centred and process-centred to serve the development of the artform. In addition to making career sustainability within the sector very difficult, the current models also impact on the artistic development of both individual artists and artists working within company models, as the continuous “chasing” of funding deadlines and “leaping from project to project” creates a climate in which, “[w]ork doesn’t have a chance to breathe”. There was an overarching sense of a need to think about funding structures in a “different way” that would allow for “aligning funding structures to suit artists’ needs”.



## Actions

- The level of Arts Council funding available for dance needs to be increased in line with expanded levels of activity, quality of work being produced, and diversity within the sector. This will allow for further growth.
- There needs to be equitable funding across art forms within the existing suite of award schemes.
- Pay scales should be established for artists that reflect career stage.
- There needs to be better alignment of funding cycles for different kinds of applicants (e.g. independent/individual artists with project funding; organisations/companies with strategic funding). This would allow for easier “negotiation of opportunity deadlines to coincide with what dance artists are doing”.
- Review the higher rate of taxation of international dance artists, as this cost is currently absorbed by dance companies.
- The award of strategic funding should be expanded to also include “emerging” companies, as this is an important way for dance artists to develop their practice.
- A development of the corporate tax system that integrates a “percent for art” scheme could be extremely beneficial for dance and other performing arts practice in Ireland. Existing models can be found in France and Switzerland: Fondation BNP Paribas (France); Fondation d’entreprises Hermès (France); Pour-cent culturel Migros (Switzerland); Dance Reflections by Van Cleef & Arpels (France).
- The tax exemption scheme governed by Section 195 of the Irish government’s Taxes Consolidation Act, 1997, should be extended to include choreographers and their works. It currently only applies to visual artists, composers, sculptors, and writers.
- Funding models could be reworked to incentivise collaboration; a “small pocket of money” within awards to allow companies to support independent artists would have a positive impact on the most precarious aspects of the dance ecology.
- Project Awards and alternative schemes need to encompass projects that span a number of years to allow for long-term growth and the development of artists and the sector as a whole.
- Funding models need to incorporate more flexibility to allow them to be more artist-centred and process-centred.

## Education and Training

Dance education has long been recognised as a chronically underdeveloped area within formal education provision in Ireland. Dance continues to remain embedded as an optional strand within physical education curricula at primary and secondary levels, and there is currently just one degree level course in Dance at tertiary level.<sup>4</sup> There is no full-time professional-level conservatoire training available on the island, and dance students who wish to pursue professional training from the age of 15/16 must go abroad to train.<sup>5</sup> The detrimental effect of these combined deficiencies on both current operations and the future sustainability of the sector was expressed repeatedly across all three Think Tanks.

Contributors noted that the third level dance education now on offer at the University of Limerick was a welcome and important development. Many participants explained, however, that the continued lack of full-time, conservatoire-style professional dance training on the island results in a small pool of available professional dancers for productions.

There is a concern that this pool will reduce even further if dancers are not supported to train abroad. A connection was also made between the dance sector's "shallow roots", which result from education not being embedded in the education system, and a subsequent lack of societal "dance literacy". As one participant remarked, in an ideal world, "[w]e would encounter diverse, dance-literate audiences with a cultivated awareness of dance from an early age through the education system. People starting sentences with 'I know nothing about dance' would be a thing of the past". A concern was also voiced that because dance education is not provided for within formal education, there is "undemocratic" access to dance education, and a danger that dance is becoming "a very middle class pursuit".

4. During the Think Tank conversations, the Irish National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) was engaged in a consultation process on a new, Draft Primary Curriculum Framework ([see link here](#)). This proposed new curriculum at primary level places Dance as an optional activity within a broad "Arts Education" curriculum area. Three main areas of arts education are listed (visual arts, music, drama), with dance placed in parentheses as belonging to a sub list of "other aspects" of arts education (Draft Primary Curriculum Framework, p.11). The recognition of dance as an artform is welcome in this proposed curriculum, however dance continues to be viewed as an additional and optional aspect of education, rather than as a core element of arts education.

5. See, for example, Jenny Roche, The Arts Council Dance and Education Report (2016): [here](#).

## Audience Engagement

A further strand of discussion focussed on issues related to the societal perception of dance as a career and opportunities for recruitment to the sector. It was felt by some that there is still a stigma attached to dance as a profession, especially for male dancers. This discussion strand was often accompanied by thoughts about public engagement and ideas for audience education and development. To counter the perception that dance is not a “normal” career, it was suggested that there needs to be a stronger promotion of existing career paths in dance outside the sector (e.g. information provided to school career guidance counsellors). Greater attention could be brought to the wide range of roles that are available beyond the publicly visible roles of performer and dance teacher: “everybody can have a career in dance”. The Arts Councils and public broadcasters were identified as having an important role to play in developing the profile of dance through programming initiatives. Increased visibility and promotion of the diverse range of dance activities happening across the island would aid with creating more inclusive perceptions of dance as not only an artform, but also an everyday activity and a viable profession. It was felt that if dance is to be seen in a “new light”, cultural views about dance in Irish society need to change. To achieve this, dance should be afforded the same educational foundation, outlet and reach as any other artform (e.g. literature, drama, music).





## Actions

- Dance education should be removed from the physical education curriculum at primary and secondary levels and taught as an artform by trained professionals.
- In the short term, funding schemes supporting full-time conservatoire training abroad should be reinstated.
- In the long term, the establishment of a National Dance Company housed in a dedicated national producing house for dance, and with an integrated professional dance school and junior company, would address many of the fundamental problems associated with the sustainability of the dance sector in Ireland; “people could be proud of their national ensemble”. It would also create a clear identity for dance and would be a key driver in developing dance audiences.
- There needs to be greater promotion and support of dance within educational structures and across broadcasting platforms.
- The development of a national programme for dance education and advocacy would promote and enable the democratisation of access to dance education across the island. Existing programmes in music education in Ireland and in dance education in the UK could serve as potential models: e.g. Ireland’s National Music Education Programme, Music Generation, or the CATs (Centres for Advanced Training) scheme in the UK.



## Ecology of the Dance Sector

Discussion about artist wellbeing and professional development was a consistent thread across all three Think Tank conversations. This topic was especially prominent in discussion about the current ecology of the dance sector from both an infrastructural and economic perspective, and from the perspective of the dance sector's sustainability. There was frequent reference made to the precarity experienced by dance artists within the current economic context and how this impacts on wellbeing and career trajectories. It was noted that although the current neoliberal system allows for certain artistic and personal freedoms, it also requires artists to be endlessly "on" and "resourceful"; otherwise they risk becoming invisible within the system. Artists pointed out that this way of living is exhausting, and this situation was acknowledged as contributing to artists having a more precarious existence with less sustainable careers, and less social protection and employment rights. It was also noted that there are only a small number of mature artists, creatives and technicians in the dance sector in comparison with the number of younger members, and that this can be viewed as a "damning" indictment of the current viability and sustainability of a career in dance.



## Funding Pressure

Current funding models were identified as contributing to the precarious nature of the profession. There was general consensus that dance artists and companies have to spend too much of their time “chasing financial supports”. Due to economic precarity and the constant pressure to secure funding to continue working, dance artists struggle with their work-life balance; “my life is my work and my work is my life”. The short-termism and ‘always on’ culture within the sector is also recognised as having a cumulative negative impact on dance artists’ wellbeing and mental health, with burnout being an increasing worry, especially for established artists: “we’re starting to run on empty”. Another point made about the current funding cycle for dance, which is predominantly activity and product-based, is that it makes artistic development difficult. It was suggested that “evolution is impossible”, as artists are “double-working [their] money”, trying to create performance products while concurrently trying to research and develop future work that may or may not receive funding. It is felt that the current models allow no time for artistic growth and reflection on practice. Artists also expressed a sense that being seen to be “busy” through the production of a large volume of outputs is equated with success, whereas the “quieter”, but necessary, work of development is not prioritised in current funding models. There were several calls across the three conversations for “having time to process dance practice more deeply”, and the need for “support for a longer time for research and development of work, and time for reflection”.

When wellbeing was discussed within the context of the dance ecology and existing support infrastructures, it was felt that a lack of visibility and joined-up infrastructural support for dance at the macro level can lead to a feeling of isolation for individual artists working to develop the dance ecology at a micro level. There was a pervading sense across the three conversations that dance artists’ labour is often unrecognised and undervalued. This sense was particularly acute in discussions about residency schemes. Due to a lack of critical mass of dance practice in regional and rural areas, there is increased pressure placed on dance artists working in these areas (e.g. within the Dance Artist Residency scheme) to essentially function as resource organisations. Individual artists working in regional locations undertake significant additional labour in developing networks and educating communities and local authorities about dance. A concern was raised that if artists developing growth from the ground up are unable to continue their work either for personal reasons (e.g. due to burnout/ill health), or due to the discontinuation of funding, or lack of long-term funding security, there is often no-one available to continue their work. Progress achieved through years of labour establishing programmes and developing networks is then lost: “it just evaporates”.



## Balancing Responsibilities

A further important strand of discussion centred on the needs of artists with caring responsibilities. There was recognition of a need for a more inclusive perception of artists as normal, “living and breathing” people who might also be parents or have other caring responsibilities. This would prevent artists feeling they need to hide this side of their lives to succeed in their professional practice, and then suffering a sense of failure if they struggle with juggling both aspects. Dance artists spoke of difficulties encountered in trying to combine caring responsibilities with rehearsal and touring schedules, especially in the context of the lack of affordable childcare or available childcare facilities. There was also a sense that accompanying children are not always welcome in professional contexts, and artists spoke of having to decline participation in some projects due to the seeming impossibility of combining caring and professional needs. It was acknowledged that the lack of support for artists with caring responsibilities is contributing to the unsustainability of careers in the profession.



## Actions

- The introduction of a Universal Basic Income would provide much-needed support for dance artists.
- Dance artists with parenting or other caring responsibilities are in need of dedicated infrastructural and funding support to allow them to continue with their practice.
- The cost of childcare and/or other caring duties needs to be explicitly allowed and accounted for in funding applications as an additional cost.
- Relationships in which artists feel like they are supported do not necessarily have to be formed through funding relationships. There can also be a relationship of care in which organisations support artists through partnership and recognition. This allows artists — especially independent artists — to feel like they have a “home”.
- An alternative, and more holistic, model for Dance Artists Residencies could be developed in collaboration with venues. Artists would be considered employees (rather than content producers) in a 3 – 5 year collaboration with a venue. This would deliver optimal “conditions for creativity” in which artists feel supported and are “safe and can play”.
- The timescales for the communication of Irish Arts Council funding decisions need to be restructured; its “last-minute” nature is extremely stressful for applicants.
- A cultural shift is needed within the sector to create space for thinking/making and to counter the ‘circuit of constant production’ which has evolved.
- Project Awards and related schemes need to encompass projects that span a number of years to allow for long-term growth and development of artists and the sector as a whole.
- Greater clarity and transparency in the articulation of requirements for funding schemes and communications about funding decisions would allow dance artists to have a better understanding of what is expected from their work and what they can contribute.
- Intergenerational sharing of knowledge between artists at different career stages should be strengthened so that dance artists do not feel like they need to reinvent the wheel with each emerging generation. This will also change perceptions about the sector being unsustainable in terms of there being more visible paths for career development.

## Support Infrastructure

The discussion of support infrastructures for the dance sector encompassed topics relating to both the physical infrastructure available for dance, and more immaterial, yet nevertheless vital, inter-relational and networking structures at operation within the sector, both locally and internationally. Significant stress points identified across the three Think Tanks included: issues with the availability of rehearsal and performance space; relationships with venues; the underdevelopment of dance networks and infrastructure in regional locations; and the difficulty of touring dance work across the island and internationally. A further common strand of discussion addressed the importance of interpersonal relationships and support networks between dance artists. There was a general sense that the global pandemic had brought the dance sector together in an unprecedented manner, and that the conversations initiated during this time should be kept alive and developed further.

Lack of affordable and suitable rehearsal space for dance continues to be a challenge, especially for artists working outside of Dublin. The commute to Dublin to find suitable space for dance rehearsal is a drain on available time for creative work, and an added expense that eats into budgets: “funds are depleted trying to pay for space”. The “bottle-neck” created by increased activity during festivals (e.g. Dublin Dance Festival, Dublin Theatre Festival, Dublin Fringe Festival) compounds the issue, resulting in competition for suitable rehearsal and performance space. Considering regional infrastructure, participants also reported that there are few

venues available for touring dance across Ireland and that the resultant limited distribution has a knock-on effect of limiting audience engagement and development. Similarly, there was agreement across all conversations that developing international networks and access to international touring circuits was vital for the development of the sector: “we need to get off the island”; “we’re creating all of this product, but we haven’t created a distribution network to get the product off the island”.

Unique challenges faced by dance artists working in regional and rural locations was a further important strand of discussion. Artists based in rural locations have little support for producing, networking, and promoting work. It can be difficult to connect with existing dance networks on the island, and artists sometimes also have the additional burden of needing to educate rural venues about what producing dance performance entails. Traditional dance artists reported experiencing difficulty in establishing balanced relationships with other artists (e.g. musicians) working within the established gigging culture on the island, which is often not suited to traditional dance performance. Due to a scarcity of resources and sometimes also a lack of discipline-specific skill in some rural/regional arts organisations and performance venues, a “reciprocity of values” can be missing between artists and the arts infrastructure.



## All-Island Approach

There was agreement across conversations that an all-island context for the development of dance needs to be addressed. The critical lack of adequate funding and infrastructural support for dance in Northern Ireland has a negative effect on both the growth of the dance sector in Northern Ireland and the growth of cross-border and all-island developments of the dance ecology. There is no dedicated, physical “home base” for dance in Northern Ireland, and the jurisdiction’s resource organisation for dance was recently folded into the resource organisation for theatre, decreasing the visibility and recognition of dance. The disparity between funding support for dance in Northern Ireland and funding for dance in Ireland impacts not only on the development of dance in Northern Ireland, but also on the development of touring relationships within an all-island dance ecology. Cross-border networks, supports and touring relationships need to be further developed.



## Venues and Programming

The relationship between the dance sector and programming venues was a recurring theme across the three Think Tanks. It was felt that dance is still viewed as something which could or should be “added” to venue programming, rather than being regarded by venues as an essential and necessary part of programming. It was suggested that if funding bodies are not creating a requirement for venues to include dance, many venues will not see dance as a necessary programming element. Venue managers reported that the biggest challenge for presenting organisations and venues looking to programme dance is audience development. There is a perception that “dance doesn’t sell”, and for programmers “it can be a real pressure to find audiences for invited artists”. This was identified as a major structural issue within the dance sector, and within the arts landscape on the island more generally. It was also felt that institutional partnerships need to be developed, either through co-commissions or co-partnerships with venues. It was agreed that there could be more joined-up thinking across different venues and support organisations to develop performance opportunities for dance works. The development of institutional partnerships would also assist with marketing needs for artists, and would build knowledge of

artists’ practice within organisations and venues. Dance artists could then be involved at an earlier stage in programming which would assist with the development of touring and audience engagement. Across all conversations, it was agreed that strengthened relationships with venues will allow for confidence to be developed in programming dance work and that there is an opportunity to build on the current discussions between venues and dance artists to inform how new models of work are shaped together.

## Actions

- Empty spaces suitable for dance rehearsal (whether currently vacant during the pandemic, or long term) could be made available for use: “open the door for artists”.
- If performance venues are in receipt of public funding (e.g. from the Arts Councils or from a local authority), there should be a requirement for them to also programme dance.
- A funding scheme for venues to commission dance works should be initiated.
- A rural touring initiative should be established which supports grassroots development and production of works choreographed specifically for performance in rural venues.
- Strengthened relationships with venues will allow for confidence to be developed in programming dance work.
- There is an opportunity to build on the current discussions between venues and dance artists to inform how new models of work are shaped together.
- The Arts Councils could take a leading role in ensuring venues are informed about the specialised needs of dance artists and companies. A document outlining production requirements for dance should be drafted for use by venues that are unfamiliar with programming dance. Support organisations and festivals can help rework this document with production-specific tweaks, as necessary.
- Restructure funding schemes so that dance works could be pre-made well in advance of scheduled performances to address the “festival bottleneck” for performers, creatives, technicians, and spaces. This would move away from the current model of works being made in the four-week period running up to a festival premiere. It would also allow for a longer lead-in time for promotional activities, which will, in turn, help with audience development.
- Co-commissioning should be thought of on a broader scale to address the “fragmentation of the presentation ecology” across the island.

## Actions

- Establish a funded “producer in residence” scheme in collaboration with dance support organisations. Salaried dance producers could then engage with smaller productions that would not have had the finances to engage a producer, and they would also have the remit to build international connections and touring networks for the entire dance sector.<sup>6</sup>
- Dance artists and companies should be supported to attend existing international platforms such as APAP and Tanzmesse. Government agencies should not support showcase platforms that do not resource artists to attend them.
- The number of independent artists receiving support for touring should be increased.
- Investigate the establishment of a “dance production hub” that supports artists and allows them to focus on their practice, rather than having to “wear 17 hats and exhaust themselves”. This would create a space for sustainable practice that allows for periods of recuperation and exploration. Existing models in the UK: Dance4, Nottingham; Strike A Light, Gloucester; Scottish Dance Theatre independent artists’ programme.
- Increase the pooling of resources between institutions and organisations that support dance.

6. Since the conclusion of the Think Tank conversations, Dance Ireland has initiated a Producer in Residence Scheme, with a first appointment made in September 2020.





## Income and Budgets

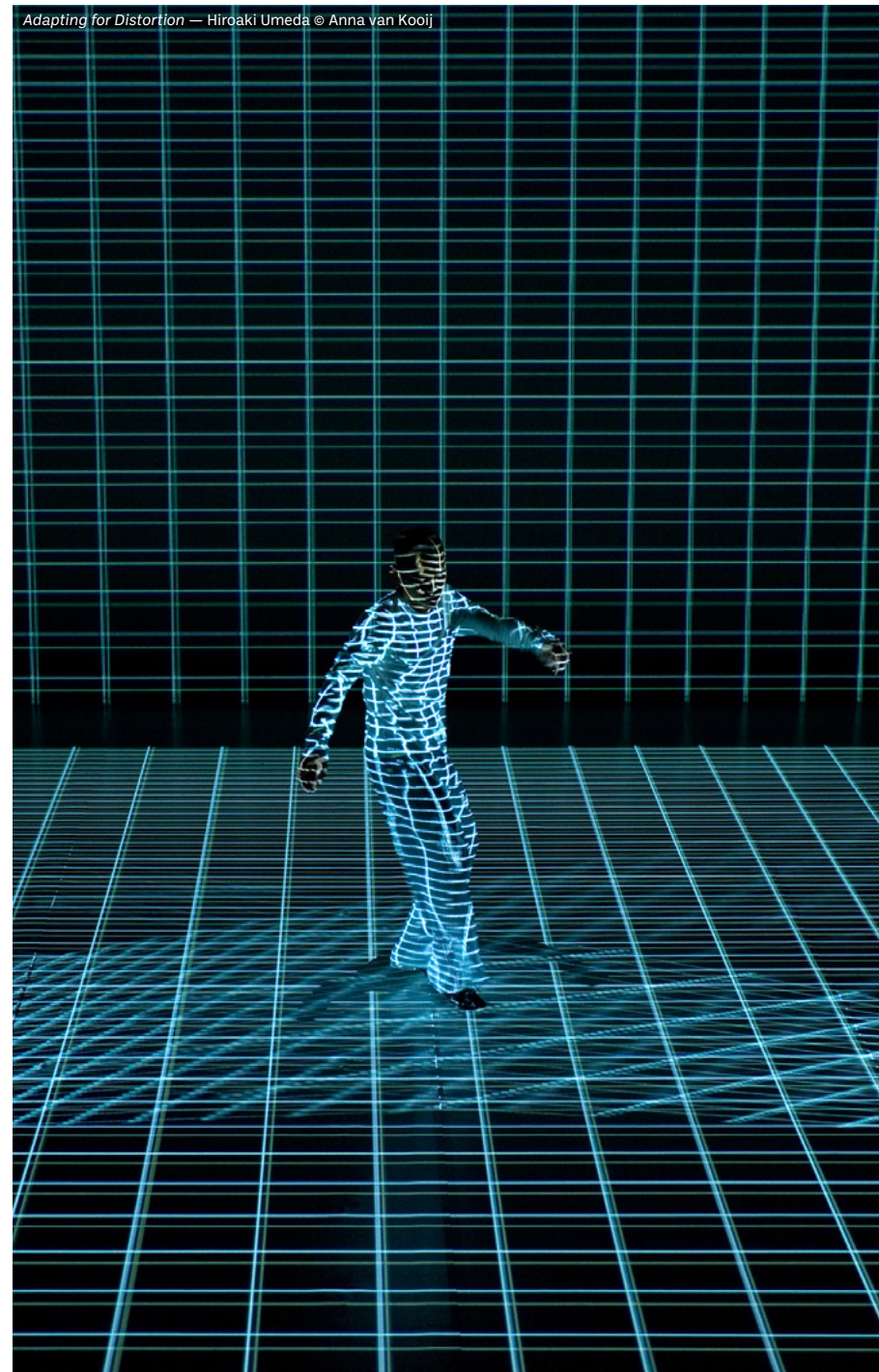
The global pandemic has had a profound impact on the performing arts sector as a whole, with the dance sector — a sector often dependent on physical connection and touch, and one already facing significant infrastructural challenges — being particularly hard hit by lockdown restrictions. Think Tank participants reported existential challenges and increased precarity arising from the pandemic, including complete loss of income for some, and uncertainty as to when, or even if, cancelled projects or teaching activities could be recommenced. Conversely, the receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (in Ireland) was reported by some as representing the first time they had experienced some degree of financial security in their working lives. The enforced halting of activities was also felt to create a welcome space for reflection on the sector’s broader challenges and possibilities for future development. There was concern expressed about the impact of the global pandemic on the training of new dance artists. It was felt that fewer dancers are likely to go into full-time training abroad, and that this could result in a lost generation of dance artists: “we could find ourselves with a gap down the line with dance artists who are just not there”. There was a general sense across all three conversations that the full impact of the pandemic is yet to be understood, but that it raises both significant additional challenges and also some opportunities.

In discussions about the impact of the pandemic on live performances, artists expressed concern about projects already

in development over a long period of time now having to be reimagined quickly and “drastically” to suit the new pandemic restrictions. It was felt, by some, that this is impacting negatively on the artistic integrity of work. The uncertainties created by the pandemic are also creating pressures on budgets. Current funds are being allocated to support artists, creatives and production teams that were engaged for cancelled projects, and extra development time is needed to reimagine and redesign productions to fit with pandemic restrictions. When undertaking a redesign of productions, keeping artists, production teams, and audiences safe is a challenge, and uncertainty and lack of knowledge or clear guidelines about requirements and procedures makes the situation even more difficult. Feedback from meetings with government bodies has made clear that the onus is on individual arts sectors to create specific and customised protocols around returning to work. This was felt to give agency to the dance sector to take the lead in defining what is needed and how to proceed. However, even with safety protocols in place, smaller capacity audiences required by pandemic restrictions will result in smaller box office. The gap between money coming in and money needed to make work is increasing, and both venues and companies will need a significant increase in subsidy to survive. Travel restrictions have also impacted on touring plans, and artists felt that it is unclear how the expectation from funding bodies for the development of international collaborations and co-funding opportunities can be sustained in light of the pandemic restrictions.

## Moving Online

As a result of the pandemic, there is pressure to move dance performance into a digital environment, and this raised questions for some participants about the integrity of the art form and the monetisation of work. It was suggested that there should be an increased sharing of resources and knowledge around presenting work online. Participants also acknowledged that the “move online” creates a new platform for dissemination and generates new audience connections. People who previously might not have traveled to a venue to see a dance work are watching dance performance online, and participants also reported that working on digital platforms is helping build networks and connections with international collaborators. In this sense, the global pandemic was seen to allow for a re-thinking of dance audiences and the dissemination and production of work. However, it was generally agreed that while the current, large-scale “move online” may produce some exciting new pathways for dance, it is also viewed as a “sticking plaster” to help the sector through a challenging time, rather than a new model that will replace live performance. A common thread across all three Think Tanks was a sense that the global pandemic has had the positive effect of connecting people across the dance sector, allowing artists to “develop a broader sense of the dance ecology”. It has raised awareness of how dance artists often work inside their own “bubbles”, but that “we are stronger together than we are apart”.



## Actions

- Dance artists should be supported in making the transition to new methods of dissemination for existing projects (e.g. performing locally, outdoors, online).
- There needs to be common access for all dance artists and educators to protocols relating to risk assessment and other necessary documentation needed to support work going forward.
- The costs of creating/presenting work online could be supported either by a dedicated funding stream, or as an additional funding criterion within existing award schemes.
- Funding bodies should re-assess any requirements for, or emphasis placed on, international collaboration and co-funding in funding applications in light of pandemic travel restrictions.
- The connectivity developed between artists during the global pandemic — especially through online meetings and events that have allowed artists from every location on the island and internationally to attend — should be maintained and built upon.





## Coming Together

The “coming together” of the dance sector during the pandemic was seen to have been a positive development and it was agreed that discussion forums should continue beyond the pandemic. During discussion about sustainability and relationships, it was felt that the idea that any artists are “independent” is unhelpful, as everyone operates within organisational structures, and there is a relationship of interdependence between artists and the structures that support them. There was a general consensus across all conversations that the sector now needs to formalise collaborative and distributed ways of working. There was also recognition that more formal representation of dance within the wider arts sector is needed, not just for the purpose of dance advocacy, but also to enrich the discussions of different arts bodies: “dance artists should be sitting on boards, as the knowledge and perspective that a dance artist brings is unique”. It was noted that some important advisory committees continue to have no dance representative (e.g. Culture Ireland).





## Sustainability and Diversity

In discussions about the dance sector's sustainability from an ecological perspective, "green proofing the dance sector for climate crisis" was raised as an important consideration. Participants felt that the creative flexibility of dance artists presents opportunities for dance to lead the way in finding creative solutions to the climate emergency. It was suggested that alternative modes and speeds of international travel can be explored, and that the pandemic affords the opportunity to think "glocally": putting down roots locally but being globally connected through online platforms. However, there was also a call made for artists to be aware of the "power dynamics" at work within the green agenda. Artists who have already established themselves internationally have the option of reducing travel without incurring a negative impact on their career development, but it will remain important for younger artists who are still establishing themselves to have the option of international travel in order to develop networks and collaborations, and to bring their work "off the island". An "ecological practice" that connects with both the physical surroundings of a locality, and its existing artistic networks and communities, was suggested as a potential model to help build interdisciplinary, collaborative connections for dance artists. There was also a call for dance artists to think of ways to support sustainability in production practices, so that dance performances have a longer life span: "we are becoming a throwaway culture".

Issues connected with cultural and ethnic diversity were raised across all three Think Tanks. Dance artists working in Ireland who are not Irish reported finding it more difficult to integrate their practice into local communities. They spoke of experiencing a barrier, or "double flag" in their career development, due to not only being a dance artist, but also not being Irish. It was pointed out that in addition to the need for greater acceptance of racial, cultural, and ethnic diversity in Irish and Northern Irish society, a recognition of dance as a normal profession would also help support artists experiencing this issue. There continues to be a significantly lower representation of certain demographics in dance performance across the island, including work for children, work with and by people with disabilities and neurodiverse artists, work by artists of the global majority, and work with and by older people. There is also a lack of visibility within existing promotional platforms of culturally and ethnically diverse dance forms in Ireland.

## Resource Sharing

Knowledge pooling and resource sharing was another important strand throughout all discussions of the sector's sustainability. There was general consensus that a support infrastructure should be developed to enable the sharing of resources between artists. It was felt that opportunities for intergenerational sharing of knowledge between artists at different career stages should be developed so that each emerging generation does not feel that they need to "reinvent the wheel". This would also help change perceptions about the sector being unsustainable in terms of there being a more visible path for career development. It was felt by some participants that there needs to be further support available for recently graduated and emerging artists to continue developing their craft through research or training projects that are not necessarily linked with performance outputs; a "long-term, collaborative and research platform" that allows for artistic development "without pressure or obligation to make a show". This could create a supportive "micro-ecology" for emerging generations within the broader dance ecology on the island.

## Actions

- The Irish Arts Council and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland should be asked to prioritise the development of dance for a period of five years, providing a much needed "stamp of commitment" to a historically marginalised and neglected artform.
- A union for dance artists could be established.
- The dance sector needs to establish a long-term, all-island task force that would engage in cross-sectoral advocacy for dance. A steering committee could be established that operates in an official capacity as a Campaign for Dance. This would be a representative body that is "formalised but also ad-hoc, and that represents the broadness of the sector".
- Dance resource organisations could lead on the establishment of working groups for dance advocacy.
- A funded mentorship scheme that supports independent artists at an early stage of their career will encourage a sharing of knowledge about support infrastructures and networks in the sector.
- Establish a dedicated peer-to-peer networking and support platform for newly graduated dance artists.
- The coming together of the dance community through these discussion forums should continue beyond the pandemic: "a unified dance sector is the way forward".

## Think Tank Participants

### **Think Tank 1:** *Making Dance Performance*

Hosted by Dance Limerick, 3rd July 2020.

Participants: Anne Maher, Benjamin Perchet, Carina McGrail, Catherine Young, Emma Martin, Gwen Van Spijk, Jenny Traynor, Liam Scanlon, Nicholas Nwosu, Peter Jordan, Sheila Creevey, Siobhán Ní Dhuinnín. Facilitated by and summarised by Dr Aoife McGrath.

### **Think Tank 2:** *Dance of Interdependence*

Hosted by Dublin Dance Festival, 17th July 2020.

Participants: Michael Barker-Caven, Jazmin Chiodi, Louise Costelloe, Sheila Creevey, Nicola Curry, Colin Dunne, Michael Keegan-Dolan, Rita Marcalo, Carina McGrail, Fearghus Ó Conchúir, Benjamin Perchet, Liz Roche, Jenny Traynor, Mufutau Yusuf. Facilitated and summarised by Dr Aoife McGrath

### **Think Tank 3:** *Shaping Sustainability*

Hosted by Dance Ireland, 29th July 2020.

Participants: Michelle Cahill, Louise Costelloe, Sheila Creevey, Ruairí Donovan, Megan Kennedy, Carina McGrail, Lisa McLoughlin, Cian O'Brien, Liv O'Donoghue, Tobi Omotoso, Benjamin Perchet, Jenny Traynor. Facilitated and summarised by Dr Aoife McGrath.

## Think Tank Facilitator and Report Author

Dr Aoife McGrath is Senior Lecturer and Subject Lead in Drama at the School of Arts, English and Languages, Queen's University Belfast. After a professional dance career as a performer in Germany and Ireland, Aoife has worked as a choreographer, dance critic, and as Dance Advisor for the Irish Arts Council. Publications include the monograph, *Dance Theatre in Ireland: Revolutionary Moves* (Palgrave, 2013), and the co-edited collection (with Dr Emma Meehan, CDaRe, Coventry), *Dance Matters in Ireland: contemporary processes and practices* (Palgrave, 2018). Recent choreographic work includes *Please* (NIMHAFF, 2017), *Within: Body + Time* (Accidental Theatre, 2018) and *Let Down* (Being Human Festival, Breastival, Northern Ireland Human Rights Festival, 2018). Aoife is Co-President of the Irish Society for Theatre Research, Co-Convenor of the IFTR Choreography and Corporeality Working Group, and a performer/choreographer member of Dance Ireland.

[Dr Aoife McGrath's Profile](#)

## Co-Presenters and Hosts

### Dance Ireland

Dance Ireland is the national development organisation for dance in Ireland. We support the work of our Members, and the dance sector through artistic development opportunities, advice clinics, advocacy work, commissioning and networking opportunities locally, nationally and internationally. Our training and residency programmes for professional dance artists, our Youth Dance partnerships and public engagement programmes enable the development of dance as an art-form, as an activity to be accessed and enjoyed, as well as working to progress professional practice.

We manage DanceHouse, located in central Dublin, a working base for dance practitioners and a hub for the wider dance community. We use all the opportunities afforded by DanceHouse, our own expertise and connections alongside those of our national and international partners to create a programme of work that engages the public and supports the professional, crossing the boundaries of age, experience and genre.

Dance Ireland is an active member of EDN, and has participated in key EU-funded network projects, including modul-dance, Communicating Dance and LEIM. Dance Ireland is a registered charity and receives Strategic Funding from the Arts Council. Additional funding comes from Dublin City Council and grant-aid for project initiatives comes from a wide variety of national and international sources, including Culture Ireland, Creative Europe and Erasmus+.

[danceireland.ie](http://danceireland.ie)





## Co-Presenters and Hosts

### Dance Limerick

Dance Limerick's purpose is to inspire curiosity, creativity and connection through dance. We believe dance empowers and enriches us as individuals, as communities and as a society. Our ambition is for Dance Limerick be a place for dance and a hub of creativity for our artists and for all those with whom we engage. Through dance we support artists and the public alike to be curious, to be creative and to connect with each other and to what matters in the world about us.

With this in mind, our mission is to champion and enable dance creation, participation and appreciation and to be a creative community connecting people and ideas through dance. We do this through a specially curated programme of supports for artists, and through our public facing programmes of classes, and performance platforms which encourage artistic dialogue among artists and audiences. Two such platforms include the *What Next Festival* and the *Light Moves Festival of Screendance*.

Dance Limerick is a presenting partner of the Aerowaves Network of European Dance presenters and EDN, the European Dance Network of dance houses.

[dancelimerick.ie](http://dancelimerick.ie)

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## Co-Presenters and Hosts

### **Dublin Dance Festival**

Dublin Dance Festival (DDF) brings artists, audiences and communities together to create and share exceptional dance experiences. We present live, digital and collaborative dance opportunities year-round for the widest possible audience.

We showcase the best Irish and international dance and act as a vital platform for artists and the creation of new work, culminating in an annual festival each May. We generate opportunities for artists, locally, nationally, internationally and virtually, through residencies, commissions and partnerships and by encouraging artistic collaboration, experimentation, risk-taking and innovation in dance.

We are a key platform for dance year-round, committed to increasing the profile, role and enjoyment of dance across Irish culture and society since our first Festival in 2002.

[dublindancefestival.ie](http://dublindancefestival.ie)