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From London to the North East

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Big Dance 2012 North East, Dance City





Clockwise from top left: Joo-Lee Stock and Andy Lewis, Lindy Jazz by the Angel of the North. Photo: Barry Crabtree; Dancers Holly Irving and Natasha Kowalski, Dora Frankel Dance, One Small Step/One More Step. Photo: Tony Griffiths; Young people from Durham perform in The Suffragettes project produced by The Forge at Beamish, The Living Museum of the North. Photo: Holly Eve Watson

So, I'm in The Living Room (as it's quaintly called) on the 9th Floor at City Hall in London, looking out at the Thames, Tower Bridge, the Tower of London, the Royal Armouries, the bright sunshine, the little amphitheatre built into the landscape, amidst impressive buildings of all shapes and sizes. It's the second UK national Big Dance meeting and my second time working on Big Dance – in two different regions.

A few of the most impressive aspects of this year's Big Dance are:

- it's truly national, so its presence and profile are strong
- its linked in completely with LOCOG and London 2012 Festival, which has made it far easier, at a time of economic hardship, to secure match funding especially from local authorities
- it's being coordinated by the Foundation for Community Dance (FCD), meaning that resources and information are planned and made available – saving so much time at the delivery end. Plus, the inclusive, partnership approach brings economies of scale.

This joined-up approach means that the sum is truly greater than the parts.

At a regional level, Dance City, leads the Big Dance Hub in the North East and has aims that are closely aligned to

those identified by FCD and the Big Dance London team, which are to:

- promote the artform of dance
- support professional dance artists to reach their full potential
- enable the people of North East England to engage with dance practice of the highest quality
- foster excellence in dance education and practice
- involve all parts of the regional community.

The approach being taken by Dance City is to work through the existing mechanism of interwoven networks – youth dance hubs, venues, arts organisations, schools, businesses and local authorities – as key partners. The success of which is reflected in the range of artists being employed and the number of events in the next few months embracing dance – 30 at the last count.

These include enriching existing festivals or celebratory events such as:

- Durham's co-commission with Vamos! involving a street 'parade' influenced by Arto Lindsay's work, traditional and contemporary music and TIN Arts as part of the Streets of BRASS annual event, on Saturday 7 July
- Darlington's Mass Dance which last time brought together 650 dancers from private dancing schools as well >



Tribal Assembly, Bad Taste Cru. Photo: Gary Barbour

as youth and schools groups, in front of an audience of 2000. This year it will be 700 dancers, a bigger crowd and professional companies performing, on Saturday 14 July.

There are also new events happening because of Big Dance, such as:

- The Routemaster bus touring villages in rural North Northumberland on 9 and 13 June and 14 July, with Emma Dunn's professional company, Dansformation, getting out and performing excerpts from their new piece, Northumbriana, together with Alistair Anderson's specifically composed music, and with different youth and community groups each day performing alongside and assisting with workshops
- ARC, Stockton's Arts Centre, developing new relationships with the sports sector that will continue beyond 2012
- Annfield Plain Infants' plans to run a joint celebration with Annfield Plain Juniors and Catchgate Primary, for the

Diamond Jubilee, partly funded by the local council and Derwentside Homes, with family activities planned by the children themselves, on 1 June

- Involvement in the regional platforms by the Royal Academy of Dance, the local Ceroc group, the Appalachian Cloggers, the Sage Performing Arts Academy and the Samba Band.

We are excited about the Schools Pledge and are impressed at the inventiveness of schools, colleges and businesses in finding ways to make sure it happens. Norham High and its feeder schools in North Tyneside are getting together on 18 May with a PA, banners and flags to attempt the world record together.

Blyth Valley Arts are setting up a stage outside the Concordia Sports Centre (in the middle of a retail park) and over 100 children will practice and perform the dance, attracting shoppers to join in. Middlesbrough are bringing schools and local businesses together in Centre Square, to complete the challenge together. We still want the Washington Nissan workers on board though...

The focus is very much on regionally based artists, drawing on their deep connections with localities and communities. This is the true legacy of the work – the relationships, mechanisms, experience gained and the goodwill generated to continue providing opportunities for people to access dance, to embed good practice and keep making progress.

And, as I leave The Living Room, I look round at the dedicated, talented and perceptive people working across a wide range of dance organisations. I notice how young they are and I think to myself – dance is in good hands.

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