

# Building from the ground up

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**Big Dance was set to be a big nothing in Northern Ireland up until October 2011.** Unfortunately at and up until that time nothing much was happening and we were set to miss out on 'The UK's Biggest Ever Celebration of Dance'. Thankfully this is no longer the case.

Without going into too much detail, suffice to say the infrastructure for dance in Northern Ireland is somewhat less developed than in the rest of the UK. This provided a few challenges when Big Dance tried to identify the best 'person/organisation' to approach

in bringing Big Dance to our shores. There wasn't any clearly identifiable organisation to lead the way and no financial support available from any major funders.

Some enquiries had been made, but nothing had come out of the initial discussions. Then in October 2011 DQDT had a conversation about Big Dance with Chris Stenton at the Foundation for Community Dance. As a result the wheels started to eventually turn in the right direction.

In December 2011, an agreement was completed and DQDT became the

Hub Lead for Big Dance in Northern Ireland. Given December is not exactly the month to be initiating things, unless of course you are Santa, we really started moving things along in January 2012.

It was clear from the outset that Big Dance Northern Ireland was destined to take a different format to other Big Dance programmes across the UK. However, this is the beauty of Big Dance – it can take a different shape depending on the context in which it is set. In order to make the most out of this flexibility we are

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Butterfly Ballet Big Dance Performance, Erneside Shopping Centre, Enniskillen. Photo: Andrew Paton, Photovision Photography



Above: DQDT Zumba class, Big Dance event, Erneside Shopping centre. Photo: Andrew Paton, Photovision Photography.  
 Below left: Mini Movers, DQDT, The Lakeland Forum, tutors Breda Mc Nulty and Dylan Quinn. Photo: Conor Lunny, Lunny Imaging.  
 Below right: Butterfly Ballet, Big Dance event, Erneside Shopping centre. Photo: Andrew Paton, Photovision Photography

currently working with theatres, dance companies, The National Trust, commercial organisations, community groups and schools to name a few.

Like everyone we had issues to manage, however we also had some very 'Northern Ireland' issues to deal with. In particular the dates of the Big Dance Week. These just happen to run over a potentially challenging time in Northern Ireland's calendar – the traditional 'marching season' – and a time that a lot of people are off work, on holiday or otherwise engaged in various community activities. We felt from the outset that our Big Dance programme would be more productive if it was spread more broadly across the Summer period with a few, specific activities focused in the Big Dance Week.





The infrastructural issues in Northern Ireland mean that there are a very small number of organisations who are working relentlessly to maintain the delivery of their own work. In many cases they don't have the capital or the time to develop other programmes.

The lack of up-front additional financial support available for Big Dance meant that specifically focused projects were going to be few and far between. However this didn't have to be a problem if we were creative and the programme (still developing) manages to amalgamate a range of activities that may have already been taking place, alongside special Big Dance projects.

Whilst there are four dance-focused organisations annually supported by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (we are not one of them), there are a number of other professional, and non-professional theatre and/or dance organisations regularly delivering dance in many settings and across many genres: from Indian to Irish and creative to capoeira, from the Crescents Art Centre in Belfast to numerous local dance schools and lots of Zumba, Big Dance has and is providing all of the interested parties with a wonderful joint platform from

which to collectively shout about the wonders of dance.

Big Dance Northern Ireland has therefore begun to grow. We now have a number of activities planned across the country and are working hard to promote Big Dance as a programme that everyone can get involved in. Due to the scale of the country and where we are based DQDT felt it was important to focus activities in our local area of Fermanagh and in Belfast. We continue to look for partners to help promote Big Dance linked and Big Dance specific projects and we hope more will develop.

Recently we had an exciting launch event in our local Shopping Centre. Nothing like this has ever happened before in Enniskillen and it is not too much to say that Big Dance is providing us with the platform to break new ground in how we engage people in dance.

Activities planned in conjunction with the wider Big Dance timetable include:

- Professional performances at the beautiful National Trust grounds Castle Coole
- Zumba 'dance off' at the Belfast BBC Live site
- Big Dance Musical Summer School in Enniskillen
- Big Street Dance 'Make a piece in a day' at a high profile Belfast Theatre
- Big Dance 'try a dance' community programme
- Engaging schools across the region in the Big Dance School's pledge.

And as I write we continue to look forward to forging links with various organisations to develop the Northern Ireland Programme further. Big Dance is a fantastic opportunity to remind us of the bigger picture, no pun intended, and help prove that by working together we can do so much more.

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