

Karen
Gallagher.
Photo:
MDI staff



Planting the seeds and growing new partners for Big Dance 2012 in the North West

Karen Gallagher MBE, Artistic Director, Merseyside Dance Initiative (MDI)

When Merseyside Dance Initiative (MDI) was asked to be Hub Lead for Big Dance 2012 North West, we were delighted and began to consider how best we could ensure that our region could use this as an opportunity to not only create a great Big Dance, but also develop partners, links, sponsors and participants that we might not have had the opportunity to engage with before.

In addition to collating information about what is happening on the ground through our partner agencies, MDI wanted to use this as a real opportunity to demonstrate how the region works in partnership. We devised a commission called the Big Dance NW Link Up, an opportunity for the whole region to work together with local artists to devise a new work involving 25 artists and 1,250 local people.

With MDI taking an overall lead we set up a hub with sub-regional leads – or sub-hubs – to support the overall hub coordinator at MDI. We worked

through the existing network of regional dance agencies/projects comprising of Ludus (Lancashire), DIGM (Greater Manchester), Cheshire Dance, Dance Cumbria and MDI (Merseyside). The idea being that each would develop a sub-regional network and maximise the reach of the project as a whole.

The idea of ‘cultivation events’ was already happening successfully in other Big Dance hubs, and we were keen to think about how we could best use of this model within our own hub structure. Each partner agreed to host a cultivation event in their area, using it to engage and invite stakeholders who they may or may not have a relationship with already. We felt this was a chance to think outside of the box and use the wonderful and unique opportunity of Big Dance, and involvement with the London 2012 Festival, as a major incentive to get partners involved and contributing to dance in the region. Each event was very different, but had a similar format:

- Each event was two hours long
- Included a national and a regional overview
- Each sub-regional lead gave a local overview
- Discussions took place with a chance to feedback on what had been presented
- Offering activities, performances and/or films to animate events
- Pledging of support by those present.

The pledging idea was very important as it allowed each host to follow up on promises made. MDI created pledge forms where each guest pledged in writing and signed to confirm their offer. Pledges ranged from:

- Money
- Space
- Participants
- Events
- New ideas/projects
- New partnerships.

Ludus, Cumbria and Manchester have all hosted a variety of events; some small, some not yet assessed. >



Various artists, Big Dance NW Link UP! Photo: Mira Balchandran Gokul

It was a chance we felt to think out of the box and use this wonderful opportunity of Big Dance and Festival 2012 as something that was unique and one-off.

Ludus managed to secure nearly all of their fundraising target and have established new relationships for future work as well as a real commitment from partners to Big Dance 2012, such as Lancashire Sports Partnership and Pendle Leisure. Cumbria have secured support from Sportivate and continue to follow up leads, through a modestly attended cultivation event in February, where although difficult to attract the local business sector, the public sector through Morecambe Bay NHS Hospitals Trust (which governs Lancaster Royal Infirmary, Westmorland General Hospital and Furness General Hospital), pledged their workforce development department to involve Trust staff in Big Dance 2012 North West Link Up project as a healthy way to develop team-building skills, cooperation and staff morale. Manchester are following up local authority leads. Through the Merseyside cultivation event MDI were invited to meet a Cheshire partner, who is now supporting the event financially and setting up an event to gather more interest from the community. These new partners are taking the lead, which is an unexpected outcome and is wonderful to witness.

With the MDI event we really wanted to reach out and ensure that as many people and organisations as possible could be involved, and invited people who we thought could assist in

reaching people and have the resources to back up ideas. These included:

- Large national organisations and venues: Tate Liverpool, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Society (RLPS), National Museum Liverpool and The Bluecoat
- Major festivals – Cream, Brouhaha
- Universities/Colleges
- Housing Trusts
- Local Trusts and Foundations
- MDI staff and Board members
- Chamber of Commerce
- Local authority arts officers
- Local artists and companies.

We hosted the event at RLPS, who kindly offered all attending free tickets for their evening performance as an added incentive. It turned out to be a very successful evening, demonstrating how Big Dance 2012 could roll out in many different ways and that everybody could be involved. We had already received financial support from some local authority partners and they acted as champions to encourage other officers to give, resulting in all five Merseyside Local Authorities contributing to the project. Other outcomes have been:

- Cream committing to working with us on a flashmob for their major music festival Creamfields in August
- Local trusts not only donating on the spot but following up with others who have also now donated
- Key for us was our ability to bring in some of the major cultural drivers for

the City and show them how effective dance can be as part of their up-and-coming plans and productions

- Equally as important is demonstrating our ability to engage with a number of Housing Associations who are want bespoke activity as part of Big Dance week to be delivered to their young people and tenants
- Other organisations pledging to take the theme of big dance into their existing programmes. As a result we will have a Big Dance Stage as part of Brouhaha International Street Festival, where we will reach over 20,000 people as part of their carnival event on 14 July – with Movema, a local dance company developing a Big Zumba event and Sense of Sound, a music and voice company developing a Big Sing project.

The opportunity to link up and use national programmes to maximise opportunities in our region has really helped, turning them to real advantage for the region to extend reach, initiate new partnerships and update existing ones. Doing business in this way has been a great example of how having the right idea, with the right people in the right place and time can really work. We will be developing this approach, tested through the Big Dance Cultivation Events, this for future activity.

contact +44 (0) 151 708 8810 or info@mdi.org.uk / **visit** www.mdi.org.uk