



An easy alliance

A new body – ArtWorks Alliance – has been formed as a cross-artform UK-wide umbrella for strategic organisations and networks in participatory arts. **Chris Stenton** brings us up to date with developments and why it's a good thing for People Dancing (and people dancing)

ArtWorks, a recent Paul Hamlyn Foundation special initiative about participatory artists and practice recommended that the participatory arts sector should “share and learn from one another’s experience” to better represent the interests of everyone working in the field. A swift response to this has been the creation of ArtWorks Alliance, spearheaded by People Dancing (PD) and sister organisations from music, visual arts, gallery education and writing.

We hear a lot about the importance of organisations working together, something many of us have been doing for a long time. It's certainly not a new concept for community dance: it was a cornerstone for the original dance animateurs and remains so today. From our own experiences of partnership working at People Dancing, it is clear that partnerships are complicated beasts and it takes hard work, trust and shared values for them to work.

So what is different about ArtWorks Alliance?

To start with, it has some serious credentials: four years of considered action research involving artists, teachers and leaders from across the UK, academic institutions and arts organisations from the very large to the very small. Its rationale is robust, well evidenced and based on clearly identified needs. Members of the Alliance have joined forces in an attempt to tackle some of the big issues facing artists and organisations working in participatory arts, from the premise of ‘what *should* we do’ not ‘what *could* we do’.

Participatory arts remains a relatively small profession and we know that both artists and employers would like to do more of it. Alliance plans include making inroads to help grow the employment market for participatory

artists. We will carry out a scoping study into the potential for, and barriers to, market growth and make recommendations. The Alliance will scale up quality tools developed by partners, including a Code of Practice, National Occupational Standards and potentially a credits system for continuing professional development.

We know that research is invaluable, but often don't have these skills in our own organisations. We will bring researchers and ArtWorks Alliance members together in a research network to explore both policy – how can grass-roots practice best influence policymakers' decisions? and delivery issues – what work is like for participatory artists, how it happens, and how it can happen more.

Advocacy is at the heart of the Alliance, where making an impact on issues that span artforms is clearly best done together. We'll be able to coordinate our advocacy activities and react rapidly where necessary to issues affecting participatory arts; and ensure dissemination of practice documentation, research and evaluation findings. In short, providing our members with better representation through the collective effort of many voices singing in unison where it matters.

Those forming the Alliance have a good track record of working together – in some cases spanning 20 years or more. Four of the founding partners are National Portfolio Organisations of Arts Council England and work across the UK and internationally.

Our relationships are built on mutuality, shared values and common goals. However we are careful to preserve space for our individual identities and purposes. We respect differences – and similarities – between the four nations of the UK. It's a

sophisticated kind of de-centralised leadership, and very liberating to be a part of. We are friends, but critical friends. There is rigour and debate. It keeps us alert and aware.

Then there is critical mass. The Alliance is a membership body of other membership bodies and networks. It has the potential to be very powerful – founding members represent 24,000 practicing artists. That's a lot of people power and an enviable network of expertise. And with commitments to join the Alliance from membership organisations working in health, early years, local government, music and older people, and criminal justice that wave of people power just got a whole lot bigger. This critical mass, we believe, is essential in helping ensure people outside of ‘the arts’ take what we do (though this is in fact, what *you* do) more seriously.

My colleague Kathryn Deane, Director of Sound Sense (the community music association) is passionate about the importance of ‘making change stick’. As People Dancing prepares for its 30th Anniversary year being part of this change and helping it stick feels so very important. It will be quite a challenge, but not one we can shy away from.

Info

www.artworksalliance.org.uk

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