



Maiden Voyage Dance, SureStart, North Belfast. Photo: Neil Harrison.

At the heart of practice

Nicola Curry, Artistic Director of Belfast-based Maiden Voyage Dance explains how, despite significant funding challenges and limited local training pathways, has spent a quarter of a century expanding access to contemporary dance in Northern Ireland. Participation is at the centre of its work, connecting artists with communities and demonstrating how dance can build confidence, wellbeing and connection from early childhood to later life.



Maiden Voyage Dance, MoveFit. Photo: Neil Harrison.

For twenty-five years, Maiden Voyage Dance has been part of the fabric of Northern Ireland's contemporary dance landscape. As an artist-led commissioning company based in Belfast, it has helped nurture choreographers, performers and creative collaborations while also working to broaden where and how people encounter dance.

Alongside colleagues across the sector, we have been part of a gradual shift in how contemporary dance connects with communities, not only on stages, but in schools, neighbourhoods and public spaces. Participation has become central to that story. Through commissioning new work, supporting artists and developing participatory programmes, Maiden Voyage Dance has sought to create opportunities for people of all ages to encounter dance, often for the very first time.

A landscape of challenge and determination

The context in which dance operates in Northern Ireland is both distinctive and challenging.

Over the past decade, government investment in the arts in Northern Ireland has fallen by 30–50% in real terms. The figures are stark:

- Northern Ireland per capita arts spend: £5.05
- Wales: £10.51
- Republic of Ireland: £21.58 – £25.90

We now have the lowest per capita arts spend in the UK and Ireland – roughly half that of Wales, and a fraction of what is invested just across the border. There are no vocational dance degree programmes in the region. Many of the most talented young dancers who come through our work have no choice but to leave.

Yet these challenges have also fostered resilience and creativity. Small organisations often develop flexible ways of working, building partnerships and reaching audiences beyond traditional theatre settings.

For Maiden Voyage Dance, the guiding idea has remained simple: to move people through exceptional dance experiences.

We commission choreographers, composers and

>>

collaborators to create new work for stage and public space. We support artists at different stages of their careers, and we develop participatory programmes that invite communities to engage with dance in ways that feel open, welcoming and creative.

Participation has, therefore, become a thread running through much of our work – connecting artists, audiences and communities.

Participation at the heart

My own introduction to contemporary dance came through Ulster Youth Dance, an Arts Council of Northern Ireland initiative in the 1980s and early 1990s that introduced many young people to the possibilities of dance. Among its alumni are choreographers Dylan Quinn and Jennifer Rooney, who have gone on to established careers in dance in Northern Ireland and beyond.

For me, that early experience reinforced a belief that participation should sit at the heart of how dance organisations work.

At Maiden Voyage Dance, participatory programmes are closely connected to the artistic life of the company. In the early years, engagement activity was repertoire-based, taking place in schools and community settings.

What this has looked like in practice has evolved over 25 years. In our early years, participation meant bringing repertoire into schools and communities, addressing practical barriers — cost, geography and transport — that often kept dance behind closed doors. Over time, it grew into something more sustained: longer relationships, deeper investment, programmes genuinely shaped by the people in them rather than delivered at them.

Right: Maiden Voyage Dance, BMC-Studio.

Bottom left and right: Maiden Voyage Dance, Participation Training.

All photos: Neil Harrison.



The result is a body of work and a fundamental practice that has become not just a way of introducing people to dance, but a space where creativity, confidence and connection can grow.

Early encounters with dance

Our work also reaches the very youngest participants.

Through partnerships with Sure Start, a government programme which provides support to parents from pregnancy until their child's fourth birthday in disadvantaged areas of Northern Ireland, we have developed workshops and performances designed specifically for babies, toddlers and their parents or carers.

In 2025, alongside performances of *Moonlight Dream*, a dance theatre production for babies aged 0–3 created by choreographer Georgia Tegou with original music by Belfast based harpist Ursula Burns, we delivered a series of live harp and dance workshops in SureStart settings in North and South Belfast. The sessions introduced families to dance through gentle movement, music and sensory play, offering a relaxed and welcoming first encounter with the arts.

Working through existing SureStart groups allowed





“In these shared environments, dance becomes more than a performance. It becomes a meeting point, a conversation, and an invitation for people to move, imagine, create and transform together.”

us to reach families who might not otherwise attend arts activity. Seven workshops took place across community venues, engaging 62 adults and 64 babies and toddlers, some as young as five weeks old.

For many parents, it was their first time participating in a creative workshop with their child. The sessions combined live harp music, movement and colourful sensory materials, creating a calm and playful environment where babies could respond freely.

Parents observed their children becoming more focused, relaxed and engaged with the music and movement. Many spoke about how much they valued the opportunity to spend creative time with their babies while also meeting other parents. As one participant reflected: “What a great experience. I met parents I don’t usually meet. This is good for me as a stay-at-home dad.”

Families who took part in the workshops were also offered free tickets to attend Moonlight Dream at the Belfast Children’s Festival. For many, this was their first visit to a theatre and their first experience of a dance performance. One parent described the experience simply as: “...our children’s first trip to a theatre and our first time at a dance show. It was brilliant.”

>>



Clockwise from right: Maiden Voyage Dance, MoveFit, Holy Cross Boys. Maiden Voyage Dance, Surestart, South Belfast. Maiden Voyage Dance, BMC Outdoors. All photos: Neil Harrison.

Experiences like these can be powerful early introductions to the arts. They show that dance can be something gentle, playful and accessible, something that belongs to parents and babies as much as it does to professional stages.

Move Fit

While early years work introduces very young children to movement, other programmes focus on supporting children as they grow.

Move Fit was an after-school programme developed to promote physical and emotional wellbeing among primary school pupils.

The project began as a pilot in 2017–18, working with four primary schools in North Belfast. The programme was offered free of charge and coordinated by dance artist Sandy Cuthbert, with sessions delivered by professional dance artists including Sheena Kelly, Aisling McCormick, Janie Doherty, Sean O'Neill and Rosie Mullin.

The programme focused particularly on children who were less active or who might not normally take part in extracurricular activities. Alongside physical activity, the sessions created a space where pupils could explore creativity, expression and teamwork. Schools were involved in shaping the programme, and each class had a nominated assistant who took part in professional development days each year so that dance activity could continue in the classroom.

Teachers spoke about the impact on pupils' confidence and wellbeing. One teacher reflected: "We have some very shy and introverted children, and it is great seeing them develop in confidence... In the Move Fit setting they have had the opportunity to express themselves through creativity and movement. Children leave feeling happy and exhilarated. Wouldn't it be great if Move Fit could be rolled out to every school!"

Belfast Movement Choir

Participation within Maiden Voyage Dance also extends beyond childhood.

In 2019, we developed Belfast Movement Choir, an intergenerational project for women and girls across the city. Inspired by the idea of a choir — but expressed through movement rather than voice — the project invited participants to explore collective movement in a supportive and creative environment.

Funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, the project ran over three years and established four groups in disadvantaged inner-city areas, where six experienced dance artists and five trainees worked with 124





participants aged 5-85, meeting weekly to explore movement together.

The project culminated in an outdoor performance in Ormeau Park and the creation of a dance film, later screened at the Strand Cinema in Belfast.

Today, a combined group continues to meet weekly at the Crescent Arts Centre in Belfast.

One participant captured the project's impact beautifully: "At an age where my movements were becoming restricted... Belfast Movement Choir introduced me to a world I hadn't imagined. I developed a new relationship with my body, no longer defined by limitations, but by potential and possibility."

Partnerships and professional pathways

Participation is also closely linked to the development of artists and the wider dance ecology.

Northern Ireland does not currently have vocational degree programmes in dance, meaning many young dancers leave the region to train elsewhere. Supporting professional pathways locally is therefore an important part of strengthening the sector.

In 2024, Maiden Voyage Dance began a foundational partnership with Luail – Ireland's National Dance Company, opening new opportunities for artistic exchange across the island. Together, we developed a pilot initiative for emerging artists interested in participatory dance practice. Following an open call in

2025, five artists from Dublin, Cavan, Derry and Belfast were selected to undertake the Introduction to Dance Teaching in Community Contexts Level 4 Diploma, accredited by People Dancing UK. The programme combines practical intensives, mentored teaching placements and one-to-one support from lead facilitator Dylan Quinn.

Looking ahead

Over twenty five years, Maiden Voyage Dance has grown alongside the communities and artists it works with. As a small organisation, our strength lies in remaining flexible, collaborative and responsive to changing contexts.

Participation continues to sit at the centre of our work, connecting professional artists with communities and creating spaces where creativity can flourish.

As we look to the future, we hope to continue expanding where dance happens, not only on stages, but in classrooms, parks, community centres and public spaces.

In these shared environments, dance becomes more than a performance. It becomes a meeting point, a conversation, and an invitation for people to move, imagine, create and transform together.

Info

www.maidenvoyagedance.com