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Open Space survey on a youth arts network for Northern Ireland

**A report written on behalf of Young at Art by Sheelagh Colclough
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1. Introduction

This is the summary of findings of an online survey conducted by Young at Art and facilitated by Audiences NI in December 2007. The survey consisted of questions about the respondents' organisations, about the existing networks and support bodies they belonged to and about their opinions on a youth arts network for Northern Ireland. (This report and the Audiences NI Survey Results Report will be available to download from www.youngatart.co.uk March 08.)

2. Background to survey

Since 2001, Young at Art has coordinated an annual forum called Open Space, on topics of relevance to the youth arts sector. In March 2007, Young at Art brought a proposal to an ACNI sectoral meeting of youth arts practitioners and key organisations, for the development of a youth arts network.

From that meeting it was felt that some kind of communication structure was definitely needed and the idea was supported by the youth arts sector. The reservations which were expressed were the need to examine the services which already existed and the need to make sure that any new entity or service was not the sole property of any one organisation.

Young at Art committed itself to taking the first steps – finding out what people want and who should be involved. In autumn 2007, it commissioned independent artist Sheelagh Colclough to gather information and construct a brief online survey through which a broad picture of what the sector needs can be gathered.

3. Timescale

Limited funds allowed only a small scale piece of research of approximately 6 weeks from beginning to end, work being done on a part time basis.

November 2007

Contact with key organisations to verify terms of reference, investigation on existing networks and services, research group established, informal consultation on draft survey, survey respondents database drawn up, survey finalised and publicised.

December 2007

Online survey available for 2 weeks, collation of data into statistical analysis report by Audiences NI.

January/February 2007

Draft survey report made available to key agencies, feedback sought and incorporated into final report's recommendations.

4. Methodology

4.1 Devising questions

A research group of a cross section of arts, youth arts, community arts organisations and statutory bodies were invited to provide informal consultation, (10 members). Initial feedback received along with research on provision and range of existing networks was used to devise and format questions. A draft survey was then sent out and was further edited in line with responses received from members of the research group and advice from Audiences NI.

4.2 Sourcing respondents

Respondents for the survey database were sourced from:

Existing Young at Art databases

Arts Council NI youth arts sectoral meeting attendees, through invitation from ACNI

Forum for Local Government & the Arts

Youthsearch minority ethnic youth database

Survey research group

Help from other organisations circulating survey to own members via internal emailing lists and e news, CAF, VAI & NICVA

5. Response

The online survey, facilitated by Audiences NI, was available for 2 weeks from 3rd–17th December and included an incentive completion prize of £50 of Play Resource Centre vouchers. Audiences NI sent out an active link to 185 email addresses provided in the survey database detailed above.

Of those 185 email addresses;

19 bounced – 5 alternate addresses were found

28 local government arts managers - identified as possible conduits to youth service arts groups etc.

(included a small number of addresses to different members of same organisation)

1 reported difficulty returning completed survey online and when approached did not have time to complete via telephone or other methods

Total of 51 respondents from 49 organisations completed the survey

6. Highlighted Summary of Results

6.1 Spread of respondents

39% organisations identified as being from arts sector, 18% community, 18% youth arts 16% other *, 6% youth and 4% education.

**other included local government, public body, social enterprise and community based consultancy.*

6.2 Spread of employees

78% organisations have 10 full time staff or less, 24% have only 1 full time member of staff or no dedicated staff. 61% of all organisations had a total of 3695 volunteers (3000 of which came from Voluntary Service Bureau).

6.3 Existing Membership of Current Organisations

71% of respondents are members of the Community Arts Forum, 57% are members of Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, 53% are members of Voluntary Arts Ireland and 49% are members of the Play Resource Centre. A total of 51 respondents say they regularly use 31 separate networks/support bodies.

57% of respondents had no problem with the existing networks while 29% felt that there are already too many networks duplicating services.

86% of respondents find their existing networks useful for information, 75% find them useful for advice and services and 53% find them useful for networking opportunities.

6.4 A Youth Arts Network for Northern Ireland

63% of respondents believe Northern Ireland needs a network specifically for organisations involved in youth arts and 53% believe this should be housed within an existing organisation.

Roughly the same number of respondents, who were in favour of a youth arts network for organisations in Northern Ireland, supported a youth arts network for children and young people in Northern Ireland, 63% and 61% respectively. 45% felt that these should be the same network while 16% felt they should be separate.

All 6 listed organisational needs listed in the survey (information, networking opportunities, advice and services, lobbying, research and analysis and infrastructure support) were requested by more than 40% of the respondents. Information and networking opportunities were the most requested needs by 82% and 80% in that order.

6.5 Comments

Yes, Northern Ireland does need a network specifically for organisations involved in youth arts ...

“To collate all the scraps of information which currently come from lots of different places.”

“It could improve access to the arts for young people and provide joined up thinking.”

“To provide 1 centralised area where youth arts organisations and young people in Ireland can access information.”

“There are a great many youth organisations, some of which carry out arts projects and activities. There are a number of arts organisations that work with young people. There is no comprehensive overview or understanding of who is doing what, why they are doing, how it could be improved, shared or extended, how organisations could learn from each other and work with each other for increased benefit to the young people. If there were a central organisation that could inform the youth arts, education and community sectors about what was going on and represent young people themselves, there could be a more cohesive and effective youth arts strategy for Northern Ireland. In light of current funding situations a joined up approach to youth arts programme planning and delivery could ensure sustained youth arts engagement via cross-sector development.”

“It would be helpful to have one place to go to for youth arts, instead of having to go to arts networks, and then youth networks....”

No, Northern Ireland does not need a network specifically for organisations involved in youth arts ...

“Duplication, young people’s needs should be mainstreamed across existing working bodies where possible to avoid redirecting existing/new funding sources.”

“Another talking shop with no power is only a waste of money and time.”

“I think there are already many networks and groups existing which cover both youth and arts work. I’m not sure if a network like this would benefit our organisation. I feel that there are plenty of opportunities to share information and discuss relevant issues already.”

“Rather than allocating a substantial portion of our tiny Arts budget creating a stand alone Youth Arts Network we should look at investing a smaller amount in one of the existing networks who can develop a Youth Arts section....”

“The money should be spent on frontline services for young people not in office work. There is really not enough money for another network in arts funding so suggest that an existing network makes an effort to include youth (which it should be doing anyway) within its existing budget.”

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

This survey as with all statistical analysis is open to a wide spectrum of interpretation, and is not presented as a comprehensive sample of opinion or fact. What it can provide however, is a reasonable measure of need and feeling from a healthy sample of the youth arts sector in Northern Ireland, drawing responses from most of the key professional arts organisations in the sector. (To draw a pure numerical comparison there were a total of 28 organisations in attendance at the last Arts Council of Northern Ireland’s youth arts sectoral meeting, March 2007).

The survey reflects to some extent the lack of a cohesive youth arts sector overall, respondents being made up of arts, youth, community, education and other organisations. It does however highlight some key points of overlap – information & networking opportunities cited as key organisational needs for over 80% of respondents, for example. There are common concerns too in the sector related to scarcity of resources and fear of duplication of services in the networks which operate already.

Possibly the most telling evidence on network usage and potential effectiveness comes from the numbers which indicate how many networks/support bodies respondents are members of. A total of 51 respondents say they regularly use 31 networks/support bodies, with only 4 of those, Community Arts Forum, Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, Voluntary Arts Ireland and Play Resource Centre able to claim 49% and over respondent membership.

The large number of separate networks that respondents are members of could point towards the natural diversity of the sectors which make up the youth arts sector as mentioned before but it surely suggests the real need for some kind of umbrella network which can draw together not only key information but could facilitate cross platform networking and collaboration already mentioned as being strong respondent desires.

Evidently with 31 networks already in use there is a noted lack of enthusiasm for the reinvention of yet another wheel coupled with the fact that at least 4 of those 31 seem to be scoring reasonably well with most respondents, specifically in terms of information, advice and services and networking, in descending order.

Nevertheless there does seem to be a desire coming through for some kind of support structure dedicated to the youth arts sector, with nearly identical numbers of support among respondents for a youth arts organisations network of some kind as for a youth arts network for children and young people. 74% of those who felt there should be a youth arts network for children and young people agreed it should be part of the same network as the youth arts organisations network.

At the risk of over interpretation of data culled from just 49 organisations the emergent points from this survey would seem to support further discussion among the most used existing networks, the relevant sectoral funding bodies and all the umbrella youth and arts statutory and voluntary organisations already operational.

One area of debate could be an examination of the potential capacity that existing organisations might have to develop some kind of umbrella network of general information, circulated between organisations and potential user groups which would allow for pooling of news and networking opportunities, profile raising, present a more unified public presence and more comprehensive first point of contact which may help to widen and develop audiences and participant range. An online presence would probably be the most viable starting point in terms of cost and access with options for specialist groups to create something specific for themselves with elements borrowed from social networking sites and internet user generated content.

Of course as with most things this could easily be done wrong, without the support of key trusted organisations which already serve to disseminate reliable sources of news and information, any initiative which is perceived as a hollow duplication or not comprehensive or effective enough will find it difficult to make an impact with increasingly jaded, time pressured, meagrely resourced arts and youth organisations and other potential user groups.

7.1 Feedback on Survey Findings General Summary - Key Points

1. Clarity of objectives:

- What is a network needed for, if there is consensus that it is needed
- What form will that network take?

2. The importance of utilising the strengths and expertise of existing organisations.

3. Set realistic goals and a timeframe to achieve them in. An agreed core group of organisations is needed to drive the network, a possible route being the outputs of the network built into the core groups' individual organisational work plans. Each organisation can take responsibility for its particular part on the basis of their expertise and experience and the resources which they will need to achieve this. It was noted that if funders considered this type of collaboration between organisations as part of their overall strategic aims rather than on a piecemeal project by project basis it would help encourage complimentary partnerships on a skills and expertise basis.

4. If the network is to inhabit a virtual space it needs support especially to avoid the accusation of duplication as there are a great many different but similar web presences out there. Even at the most basic level often links to other relevant sites are not listed on many dedicated youth information portals and if there are any listed they are not comprehensive. A centralised point of contact for youth arts in Northern Ireland does not seem to exist. If well used and supported by organisations a virtual network could provide a useful web presence which could become the basis for many other things including a starting access point for young people. There are international models which can be examined and adapted to work here.