

## Tackling Poverty & Social Exclusion Evidence for the Culture, Welsh Language & Communications Committee



*Collecting Gravity at the Senedd, Photo Credit: Sian Trenberth*

## Introduction

At the request of the *Culture, Welsh Language & Communications Committee*, Rubicon Dance has been invited to their meeting on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2019 to give evidence in response to their enquiry into the role of arts and culture in addressing poverty and social exclusion.

The committee expressed an interest in finding out more about Rubicon's experience of tackling social exclusion through arts and culture. In particular, the committee is interested in knowing what works, what doesn't work and any barriers that Rubicon has encountered in its work. The committee are especially interested in the resources needed to make these efforts successful, both staff and funding.

This paper addresses these specific questions and responds to some of the broader questions the enquiry raises.

## About Rubicon Dance



*Ysgol Y Deri at St David's Hall. Photo credit Sian Trenberth*

Established in 1975, Rubicon is a community dance charity built around the single, central idea of aspirational dance for everyone. We deliver dance opportunities for people and communities across the South Wales region and we have built a strong, nationally recognised reputation for our ability to reach those who are often excluded from the arts.

We frequently challenge traditional views of what it means to dance, whether this is where we dance, who we dance with or what artistic expression looks like. Rubicon works in day centres, care homes, schools, hospitals and community venues of all kinds, as well as at our own, well established premises in the heart of Adamsdown.

In a typical week we work with approximately 2000 participants of all ages and abilities giving them the chance to express themselves through dance. We encourage people from all walks of life to take part in dance, nurture talent and support and develop the sector's workforce.

Our ethos of aspirational dance for all is underpinned by our core values to make dance accessible for everyone, inspire creativity through self expression and make an impact. Our ethos is rooted in our social mission to raise cultural aspirations, work with diverse communities and regenerate them through artistic expression.

Demand for what Rubicon does continues to grow and to address this need we will develop additional capacity at the site of the former Roath Library, a short walking distance from our existing base. This new *Dance Library* will increase our capacity

significantly and promises to provide an important resource for the dance sector in Wales.

Rubicon Dance is one of the Arts Council of Wales portfolio of revenue funded organisations with revenue funding making up approximately 48% of income in the 2018/19 financial year.

### **Culture, Poverty and Social Inclusion**

Culture is a “fuzzy” concept and means different things in different contexts. Culture can have overtones of hierarchy, status and elitism but at Rubicon our interpretation of culture is it’s something that people share. We see culture as being the glue that binds communities together and that helps express identity, shared ideas and values.

*We are next, Outlook Tour 2018. Photo Credit: Sian Trenberth*



The cultural products that Rubicon creates are widely regarded for their quality and our ability to resonate with our intended audiences. We see no conflict between artistic excellence and access to the arts and this approach underpins our artistic programme. The impetus for our work is always artistic but we recognise that we also have an instrumental impact on people which is closely aligned to the current policy priorities in Wales.

Poverty and disadvantage go hand in hand but are also difficult to define. It is tempting to think of poverty in terms of stereotypes but in our experience poverty is found in unexpected places with few people actually self identifying as poor. The poor are also not a homogenous group. Poverty is diverse and its impact is not just financial. It also affects access to the arts and people’s aspirations for themselves.

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It is common to talk about poverty in the same breath as people who are socially excluded or considered hard to reach. This is the section of society that Rubicon actively seeks to work with, who in marketing terms might be referred to as the C2DE classes. In other words people who are mostly likely to be considered poor, hard to reach and/or socially excluded.



*Axon, Outlook 2018 Tour. Photo Credit: Sian Trenberth*

However, in our experience the communities we work with don't think of themselves in this way although often they find cultural and other organisations distant and disconnected from their lives. This begs the question of who exactly are the hard to reach. Is it in fact, cultural organisations themselves?

This question very much informs Rubicon's artistic practice which sees us focussing on meeting participants on their terms. The activities that some would describe as outreach are central, not an afterthought, to our artistic programme.

### **The Cultural Context**

In recent years YouTube and other social media platforms have driven a huge social shift towards democratising content production and the creation of cultural products by people who do not earn a living as artists. The Xbox and PS4 generations are also looking for experiences that are immersive and that allow the individual to have a degree of influence over the creative process. Rubicon is well placed to respond to these social trends because our artistic practice is firmly focussed on the participant, and audience member experience.

For the Year 2017/18 the Arts Council of Wales reported that participation levels had fallen by 23.9% for its portfolio of revenue funded organisations. Similarly, audience figures for performances by touring companies had reduced by 8.4% with some of the largest drops being reported for dance.

In this same period the audience that came to see Rubicon's work grew by 6.5%. Demand for taking part in Rubicon's participatory programme also remained high but due to a member of the team leaving to take up a permanent position at another revenue funded organisation some of this demand could not be satisfied which meant that participation levels were reduced.

In 2018/19, largely due to Rubicon undertaking its first tour we anticipate that our audience figures will have increased by around 10%.

## **An Overview of Rubicon's Artistic Programme**

To deliver our artistic vision we have developed four goals which are;

❑ **Workforce support and development**

At Rubicon we provide some of the most extensive training and mentoring for community dance available in the UK which includes offering apprenticeships, professional, student and volunteer placements. Rubicon manages the Wales Wide Training programme on behalf of the community dance sector organisations in Wales. Focussing on workforce development enables us to deliver a high quality artistic programme.

❑ **Performance**

Rubicon is noted for the high quality of its performances and delivers a regular programme of dance platforms that focus on the participant experience. This includes our annual School's Festival at the St David's Hall, our Community Platform at The Gate, a Youth Platform and Solo Show at Penarth Pier Pavilion, our Student end of year show which this year will be at the Riverfront as well as a tour of schools, community venues and theatre venues such as Theatre Clwyd and Soar, Penygraig. We attract high audience numbers and all of our performances feature choreography that has been co-created with our participants who are also the performers.

❑ **Encouraging people to take part in dance**

Encouraging people to take part in dance is the backbone of Rubicon's work with sessions taking place at Rubicon's base in Adamsdown as well as community venues across the region. Our Taking Part work includes delivering Learning & Education Health & Wellbeing, Hospitals, Elderly, Disabilities, Young Dancer and Open Adults programmes. Generally these programmes are delivered on a consistent and continuous basis and we also offer a range of special projects and activities in the school holidays.

❑ **Develop talent.**

To develop talent and deliver our artistic vision Rubicon provides participants with a series of stepping-stones. The availability of progression gives participants something to aspire towards after their first experiences of taking part in dance. Since 1986 Rubicon has provided a full time pre-vocational dance course which is of national significance and has created opportunities for young talented dancers in Wales.

## **Tackling Poverty & Social Exclusion**

We are very aware that the people we work with have limited financial means which means that we strive to keep our activities as affordable as possible. This means we have developed our fundraising capacity so as to minimise the financial contributions participants need to make. This has also seen us develop new income streams by

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working in partnership with Further Education providers and other partners. We also know that our target audience trust us to deliver high quality performances that they can relate to at an affordable cost.



*Harbour, Penarth Pier Pavilion. Photo Credit: Sian Trenberth*

A significant effect of poverty and therefore social exclusion can be difficulty accessing artistic activities. These difficulties can be financial or practical such as the lack of affordable transport or childcare but often communities do not feel invited to participate.

To address this Rubicon takes its work to communities and we also commit to communities long term which means that in many cases we build up trust over decades.

One of the most damaging consequences of poverty and social exclusion can be the lack of aspiration which in turn can fuel even more disadvantage. Through our artistic programme we provide people from all walks of life with accessible and inspirational dance activities which become an important focus for their lives. The groups of participants that we work with become communities in their own right and we are able to encourage like minded people to inspire each other.

Our impact on the aspirations of young people can be clearly demonstrated by our full time pre-vocational dance course. Through it Rubicon successfully engages with young people who have low levels of numeracy and literacy and for whom traditional educational settings have not worked out. Our results in this area speak for themselves in that many of our learners come to us with numeracy and literacy levels that are below Level 2, however, since the 2014/15 academic year 86% or more of them went on degree courses at the major dance schools and conservatoires in the United Kingdom. Since 2017 we have also successfully piloted embedding young people with learning disabilities within the fulltime course.

## **What Works**

### **Consistency & Longevity**

Rubicon commits to communities for the long term and in many instances works with communities for decades. For example we have worked with Llanrumney Over 50's for more than 20 years, our programme in the Children's Hospital of Wales is 7

years old and we have worked continuously in Adamsdown Primary School for 38 years. Communities trust us to be constantly there for them and our focus on continuous provision means that when projects come we have a ready made participant group willing to take part who are confident that after the project concludes that they will not be left high and dry.

### **Process**

First and foremost Rubicon focuses on the artistic process and not an end product. Our creative process is designed to provide opportunities for individual creative choice, collaborating with others to create dances, extend movement ranges and provide an opportunity for social interaction.



*Paul & Patrick in the studio. Photo Credit: Sian Trenberth*

This is woven through our entire programme and may result in something that is performed in front of an audience or at the other end of the scale just shared with other participants during the session itself. This means that no one is excluded and that we find outlets for creative expression not only in a traditional theatrical setting.

### **Partnership working**

Working in partnership with other organisations has been a key strategy for reaching the people Rubicon wishes to target. Partnership has enabled Rubicon to access parts of the community that we want to engage with by working with people or organisations that those communities already trust. The partnership approach also allows us to amplify our impact and leverage funding to help deliver our work. For example, Rubicon works closely with the Fusion Programme in Cardiff which has enabled us to meet potential partners and draw down a small amount of funding which provided us with match funding to develop a wide range of additional regular weekly dance activities for people recovering from stroke, primary school aged children in Grangetown, people living with dementia in two care home settings and 2 weekly active elderly session in Llanrumney and Adamsdown.



Bharata Natyam at the Gate. Photo Credit: Sian Trenberth

## **Skilled Workforce**

Rubicon invests heavily in training and mentoring its workforce and is unusual in that other than the umbrella body *People Dancing* we employ a dedicated Training and Mentoring Leader. This ensures that we have a highly skilled workforce that is able to work effectively in a wide range of very diverse community contexts. Our workforce development offer includes a workforce mentoring programme, apprenticeships, professional, student and volunteer placements. This is in addition to providing a comprehensive CPD package for our staff and freelancers, which ensures that all our dance sessions meet high standards.

We are also one of the few organisations in the country that use the National Occupational standards for Dance Leadership which inform not only how we train our workforce but also how we conduct our artistic programme.

Developing and retaining a skilled workforce is a key factor in the development of our artistic programme and sustaining the dance ecology of Wales.



Boys Dance Group. Photo Credit: Adam Lloyd Binding



## Resources

In the last financial year Rubicon's income was circa £420k. Approximately 48% of this income came from the Arts Council of Wales and in recent years we have made significant efforts to diversify our funding streams. This has seen us develop SLAs with further education providers and increase our earned income and fund raising capacity. We do however run on a shoestring which means that some jobs that other organisations may take for granted such as marketing are not possible for us to fund without an increase to our core funding.

Some of our continuous programmes of work, such as our Children's Hospital programme, prove extremely difficult to fund and frequently rely on donations and other fundraising activities.

There are a wide range of funding levels within the Arts Council of Wales portfolio of revenue funded organisations. At the same time there are justifiable concerns about the equality and diversity of those accessing the arts. A potential strategy for addressing this could be to consider giving priority through the funding formula to participatory arts organisations and projects.

Underfunding also puts strain on the existing team of staff with many of them taking on additional tasks in their own time.

Rubicon currently delivers its programme with a team of 22 staff, many of whom work part time. We also work with and support a further team of 16 freelance artists and 20 volunteers. Due to funding constraints we are often unable to compete with the salaries offered by other similar organisations. Staff do however value the training, mentoring and support we provide and also that we are able to provide a degree of career progression for them. Rubicon's team is highly skilled not only in dance but also in strategies for engaging and working with very diverse participants.

Rubicon delivers its programme in community venues across the region as well as from our base in Adamsdown which is embedded right in the heart of the community. Community members feel comfortable in coming to Rubicon but you will also find us in schools, care homes, hospitals, church halls, community centres and hubs right across the region. Our facilities are dated and in particular due to funding constraints our IT infrastructure is not fit for purpose.

Our premises in Adamsdown is in constant use 6 days a week and we now at the limit of what we are able to timetable which means that the time is now right for us to increase our building capacity by taking on a community asset transfer of Roath Library and undertaking its renovation. We have therefore launched a £2million capital campaign and plan to increase our capacity from 2 to 5 studios which will also support the growth of our regional programme.

## Barriers

Apart from constraints around funding, facilities and staff highlighted above Rubicon also has a number of other barriers focussed around accredited learning;

- Due to current education policy and the structure of the curriculum dance is being pushed aside in secondary schools. This means that many talented dancers go short changed and there is a lack of understanding about careers in dance. We understand from *One Dance UK* that nationally the number of young people opting for dance GCSE or A Level has dropped by nearly 50% in the last nine years. Unlike music there is no equivalent Schools' Dance Service and dance will not benefit from a National Endowment levy although there are similar issues associated with developing talented musicians as dancers.
- We are concerned that the dance qualifications that are currently available do not accommodate the learning styles of vocational learners. This creates barriers to learning programmes, and ultimately careers in the sector, for learners who although talented are not academic. In many cases these learners also come from disadvantaged backgrounds. An example of this is the NQF framework which we understand is to be more widely adopted in Wales.
- Although currently there are 3 dance degrees in Wales none of them offer training at a vocational level which means that without exception the talented young people we work with who wish to develop performance careers leave Wales. The time is long overdue to create a conservatoire level undergraduate course in Wales that addresses the needs of the sector.



*Emma's solo. Photo Credit: Adam Lloyd Binding*

## **Impact & Evaluation**

Rubicon makes a significant impact on the people we work with which we sustain over the long term and we have many examples of emails, letters and case studies that provide evidence of this. We use a variety of evaluation methods to assess the impact of our work which we primarily use to shape our artistic programme. This includes a regular programme of session observation which allows the team to learn from one another and quality assures what we do.

Examples of other ways we evaluate our work include collecting feedback from participants in our Schools Festival or an ongoing longitudinal study of the impact of our full time course. We also work in partnership with the University of South Wales who help us evaluate our Health & Wellbeing programme by assigning masters students to us that use our programme as the basis for their dissertations. This academic level of evaluation has enabled us to develop new programmes and broker partnerships within the health sector.

Rubicon has recently begun to develop a comprehensive evaluation framework for our programme. We are working to refine it and the scale of our activities means that we need prioritise evaluation activities that inform our practice and help us demonstrate our impact and tell our story.