



WWTP Dance for Older People CPD day organised by Rubicon Dance and hosted by Impelo. Photograph by Paul Whittaker

## **WALES WIDE TRAINING PROGRAMME**

### **Supporting the Freelance Dance Practitioner Workforce**

*“Being the first in person CPD I have done in years, and my first WWTP course, Tracey, Heidi and Francine, created an amazing, inspiring, inclusive and safe space to enable practitioners to share without fear or judgment. I left the day feeling part of a special dance family, with new connections made, and a reduction in the isolation you can feel living and working in a rural area. But also a new connection with my own practice, with goals to strive towards.”*

## The Programme

From its inception in 2013, the Wales Wide Training Programme (WWTP) has sought to inspire and sustain community dance in Wales by providing training in a strategic way, responsive to sector need. It seeks to address the development and support needs of freelance community dance practitioners within the broader context of the community dance landscape across Wales.

WWTP is managed by Rubicon Dance and creates and connects a network of more than twenty five organisations and three hundred and twenty individuals working together to support training and professional development for the community dance sector across Wales. The programme of more than 17 strands of activity is supported through Arts Council of Wales.

Through its core activities WWTP aims to contribute to workforce development and enhanced community dance provision through the provision of relevant, regular and varied opportunities for dance practitioners at all stages of their career journeys. It aims to do this by -

- Developing and upskilling the dance workforce in Wales in order to ensure ongoing quality improvement and the development of new areas of practice which will address strategic priority needs;
- Enhancing employment opportunities and meeting the demand for skilled dance practitioners to bring community dance to a wider audience;
- Cultivating and sharing best artistic practice and encouraging innovation;
- Reducing professional isolation;
- Supporting specialist practice in those areas identified as strategic priorities by the sector such as Dance and Health;
- Supporting the sustainability of the sector through ensuring the workforce is fit for purpose as well as socially, economically and emotionally supported.

The work of WWTP is therefore equally relevant to individual practitioners as well as the dance organisations, other arts organisations, venues and cross sector employers who employ them to support their programmes.

*“As a collective, dance organisations and freelancers have a forum to discuss training needs, share ideas and, most importantly, work together to ensure that the community dance sector continues to create an active and aspirational community dance network across Wales.” (Freelance Dance Practitioner)*

This Case Study seeks to complement two other Case Studies with a close look at how the programme has impacted the freelance dance workforce across Wales.

## The Freelance Condition

There were **211,600** self-employed people in Wales, this is 8.3% of all usual residents aged 16 and over, compared to 9.7% in England. Of the self-employed total in Wales, 38,000 (1.5% of all usual residents aged 16 and over) employed other people and 173,600 (6.8%) were self-employed without employees.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Labour Market in Wales, Census 2021  
<https://www.gov.wales/labour-market-and-travel-work-wales-census-2021-html#content>

Dancers are primarily self-employed portfolio workers – often termed freelancers – and they form micro businesses which provide services to organisations, commissioners and public agencies.

In most cases, these dancers will work in three interlinked areas: their own **core creative practice** located primarily in his or her central art form as performers or choreographers, **other arts related work** that might include teaching in the artform, arts administration, community arts development or writing about the arts and **non-arts work** including paid work not related to any artistic field and unpaid work such as volunteering or studying outside the arts.

The advantages of working in this way are manifold and include:

- Freedom and Flexibility – portfolio working;
- Variety of work and experiences - no two days are the same;
- Autonomy and control;
- Creating your own rules;
- Doing what you love;
- You are your own boss - 'Staff meetings' are with yourself;
- Working to your values;
- Ongoing learning;
- Locational freedom – digital nomads

However, there are many disadvantages too as this workforce are largely unsupported and self-sustaining:

- Insecurity, risk and precarity;
- Lack of economic and social stability;
- No paid holidays or sickness pay;
- Working alone - isolation and loneliness;
- Irregularity and difficulty in planning – peaks and troughs;
- Travelling a great deal with the lack of stability and home life that this brings;
- Working across multiple projects and roles;
- Working long hours;
- Work life balance – “... it is hard to switch off as our home is often our workplace too and distinguishing between our professional and private life is often hard”;
- Being 'only as good as your last job' so always in danger of taking on too much through a fear of being left behind;
- Valuing your work and saying 'no';
- Retirement is often not an option due to the lack of financial security and feeling even more pressure to continue to 'perform'.
- Self-care not shared care – being outside of organisational support structures.

It is in this context that WWTP seeks to generate, support and develop a learning community that can support the workforce upon which so many organisations depend to deliver programmes of dance activity.

*“I simply couldn't survive on my freelance work alone. I rely on the two days of salaried work to pay my bills and this enables me to do the other work.” (Freelance Dance Practitioner)*

*“Being part of WWTP has enabled me to understand the needs of the freelance practitioners I engage and how I can better support them. This forum enables us to develop our understanding and ways of working for the benefit of the whole ecology.” (Partner)*

## Key Success Factors

- **Affordability and Accessibility**

*“It might sound rather prosaic but the fact that they are affordable and accessible in terms of travel is so important. When I was freelancing I often used to look at courses and training days (elsewhere) and try and decide if there was any way I could justify the expense. With the WWTP days being accessible and affordable, it means I have been able to broaden my learning. This would not have been possible if I was feeling like I could only go on training that I knew for sure would be of immediate use in my career.” (Freelance Dance Practitioner)*

*“As a freelancer based in south Wales often working in isolation, it can be difficult to share ideas creatively. Having training days provided in Wales at affordable rates, allows practitioners to come together and do just that, with input from specialists in specific areas.” (Freelance Dance Practitioner)*

*“I discovered WWTP on Facebook just after I moved to Wales. I was on Universal Credit so obtained a free place on a couple of courses and this developed my confidence and I felt welcomed and found a community I can engage with.” (Freelance Dance Practitioner)*

There are barriers to accessibility that are both geographical and financial. To address this the programme of events takes place across Wales in different locations working with different partners and a lot of the events and support are offered online to reduce barriers due to costs of travel, accommodation and time.

It is recognised that cost is a particular burden for freelance dance practitioners – there is a double cost in attending training as there is a fee involved as well as loss of income. So, no-one is ever denied the opportunity to participate in any of the various strands of WWTP due to their current financial position. For CPD events, three free places are reserved for freelancers which means that the fee for attending is waived entirely. Due to funding from Arts Council of Wales many of the WWTP events are free to attend with a series of six training sessions costed at £50.00. People can also select and attend individual events for £10.00.

- **Agency**

*“The key to the success of this programme begins with the format of the planning where representatives from the sector from all over Wales, freelancers and organisations, meet and make decisions on the training programme.” (Freelance Dance Practitioner)*

Although Rubicon Dance lead and manage WWTP and organise events each year the programme is structured to ensure that freelancers are central to the process of decision making about what training is needed and how it is set up. Partner organisations and individuals - many of whom are freelance - share decision making about the training programme and collaborate on delivery and contribute feedback and ideas that guide programming

Network Meetings are often programmed to coincide with CPD events and invitations are extended to the attendees of these events. This opens up the opportunity to participate in these meetings, making them accessible to any practitioner who might have been attending the CPD on that day, and brings an additional perspective of the programme beneficiaries to the forward planning of the programme. This creates a direct opportunity for the freelance workforce to input to the decision making process.

- **Affirmation**

*“It is a strange and precious thing to feel affirmed and validated in your own practice. WWTP provides a lovely informal platform for colleagues to share information, skills, research, ideas and practice and it also provides the opportunity to explore and stretch your understanding of your own practice and journey through reflection with others.” (Freelance Dance Practitioner)*

*“It’s tricky as a freelancer because it can be quite solitary and you can be on your edge. Tracey holds a space so well. She is curious and genuinely interested in each individual so you feel validated and are given a platform. When she invited me to give a talk I felt it was a real honour.” (Freelance Dance Practitioner)*

As a learning community, WWTP draws a lot of expertise from within so a freelance practitioner might be attending a CPD event one month and leading some CPD the next. This provides opportunities for work but is also affirming the practitioners practice.

*“I have taken part in various ways, attending sessions, leading training and as a member of a partner organisation. All are equally useful ways to be involved. I learned so much from the evaluation sessions and we were able to secure more funding and develop more work on the basis of the evidence we gathered. Leading sessions gives you the chance to reflect on your work and your practice and articulate this for others and it generated more work for me.” (Freelance Dance Practitioner)*

- **Organic**

*“The opportunities have been built gradually – it has grown in an organic way with new layers being added as need was identified. Opportunities have evolved almost like an improvisation in a dance piece. It hasn’t felt forced but has grown and developed more naturally.” (Freelance Dance Practitioner)*

*“WWTP is responsive to need and seems to develop its programme in an organic way.” (Freelance Dance Practitioner)*

*“The space is held beautifully. Tracey has been ‘us’, she understands the need and is so artist centred. She adjusts and changes and adapts curating programmes that meet the needs as they change. When organisations organises training it is often designed to meet their needs – what they want you to do or know - not those of the practitioners. WWTP is led by our needs.” (Freelance Dance Practitioner)*

It is clear from the journey WWTP has been on that a focus on organic growth that is responsive to need has been critical to its success. Some programmes have been ‘scaffolded’ to provide progression opportunities and different access points according to need such as the Evaluation support work that has included skills development and training, one to one support, best practice sharing and peer to peer support.

- **“Open, Safe and Discursive”**

*“I value the conversations we are having around Arts and Health. There is no agenda we just talk and share experiences, incidents, challenges and context and this is important as we are at a moment in time with this work and need to work out what matters, what is important, what*

*skills we need in the workforce and how we support the workforce better.” (Freelance Dance Practitioner)*

*“The organisation is exceptional – as a leader or someone attending a meeting of session I know everything will be organised and in place. I trust her implicitly. The communication is excellent and time is always taken to speak to people, to build relationships and to be attentive and to listen. There is a culture within WWTP that is open, safe and discursive. I feel known and valued before I even enter the space.” (Freelance Dance Practitioner)*

*“It is a non-judgemental space that is well held and safe.” (Freelance Dance Practitioner)*

It is interesting to note that although several practitioners mentioned this was related to the programme management, there was also a suggestion that some of it was to do with the fact that those practitioners attending were at such different stages of their career journeys. More mature practitioners were not simply leading sessions but also attending, younger emerging practitioners were not attending special events targeted at them but everyone was ‘blending’ and learning from each other.

*“When you’re a ‘senior’ it can feel like there is nowhere to go as training tends to be targeted at emerging practitioners. WWTP doesn’t do this but reflects all voices and experiences and even when leading sessions, I don’t feel like a trainer but as someone sharing practice on equal terms.” (Freelance Dance Practitioner)*

## **The Impact**

- **Supporting Isolation through Networking and Connection**

*“All of the training events have increased my access to high quality training and reduced professional isolation – without the WWTP events I believe I would barely manage one CPD event a year and I would have no way of meeting and connecting to other community dance leaders in Wales” (Freelance Dance Practitioner)*

*“WWTP has been a lifeline as a freelance dance practitioner, especially when living in rural Wales where it’s not always easy to access regular high quality CPD opportunities. By joining the outstanding WWTP talks and events I have had the pleasure of meeting and learning from a wide range of exceptional talents and implementing what I have learnt in my own practice.” (Freelance Dance Practitioner)*

It seems that WWTP events represent an important point of connection, sharing, bonding and solidarity with their peers, quality time for shared learning, reflection, dancing and conversation. This has both a social and psychological impact. The CPD events in particular appear to mitigate feelings of professional isolation, enabling practitioners to feel connected and supported. Beyond their value as learning opportunities, members of the network value the comradeship, solidarity and community offered by regular gatherings.

*“It offers a sense of cohesion; keeps us all debating and discussing the work we do.” (Freelance Dance Practitioner)*

*“Encouragement, enthusiasm, sharing of work and ideas.....making connections with other dance leaders like myself.” (Freelance Dance Practitioner)*

*“Linking in with other practitioners based in Wales. I feel a part of a community here in Wales and in that, I feel supported and valued.” (Freelance Dance Practitioner)*

*“Dates to look forward to, to know I will be fed as a learner instead of feeding all the time as a leader.” (Freelance Dance Practitioner)*

- **Skills Development**

*“It offers points of contact – you can take what you want into your practice. It’s not prescriptive.” (Freelance Dance Practitioner)*

*“I have learned so much from attending sessions from experienced practitioners as well as my peers.” (Freelance Dance Practitioner)*

*“WWTP does not provide models to follow but provokes thinking about practice through sharing learning which is empowering and validating.” (Freelance Dance Practitioner)*

This approach to skills development is crucial to the success of the programme. The training is not led by organisational need but by sector need. It is iterative and practitioner led.

- **Well Being**

*“There is a layer of well-being underneath the programme and it is fundamentally about community. As a freelancer you are juggling so many different hats and so well-being is key and this is largely dependent on being connected. A sustainable practice requires connection.” (Freelance Dance Practitioner)*

A recent WWTP training event in Cardiff brought together a group of practitioners to look at Dance and Health and part of the session explored their securities and insecurities in working in the health sector. What emerged was much wider and highlighted the needs of the freelance workforce for support with their own health and well-being. Some examples:

- *Confidence or general physical/mental wellbeing*
- *Feeling good enough*
- *Is this the right path?*
- *Feeling anxious or under pressure to make a good first/lasting impression in new environments*
- *Losing connection*
- *Not having enough £££ can I support my family?*
- *Where is the next job coming from?*
- *The unknown*
- *Do I know enough - am I safe in my practice?*
- *Personal health*
- *Self-doubt/anxiety/being too hard on myself/inner monologues*
- *A lot to hold - individuals bring their own stuff into the space*
- *Keeping people safe, especially on their journey to and from sessions*

- **Sector Development, Capacity Building and Strengthening the Ecology**

*“Networking with other dance leaders can only strengthen the community dance sector in Wales.” (Freelance Dance Practitioner)*

Participants, contributors and host organisations highlight the professional and strategic benefits that all the WWTP events bring for networking, catching up on sector developments, and maintaining and building professional relationships. This points to the impact of the programme on the whole ecology. WWTP is not simply a training programme for practitioners, it connects to the organisations that engage them and strengthens them at the same time. <sup>2</sup>

*“I have met lots of new contacts and made connections with other dance organisations that will help me through my future career.” (Freelance Dance Practitioner)*

*“This is a valuable opportunity for practitioners and commissioners to reflect together and to upskill. It is important for me as a freelance practitioner to have this as a regular point of contact and training opportunity.” (Freelance Dance Practitioner)*

## **The Covid-19 Pandemic**

*“I truly think I would have moved away from dance during Covid without WWTP. I had to take on other work like so many others. I had to ask ‘am I going to pursue what I want to pursue or go into the family business?’ The support of Tracey and Cai was a lifeline.” (Freelance Dance Practitioner)*

*“To be asked “Are you ok?” was the most important question anyone could have asked me at that time. It meant so much.” (Freelance Dance Practitioner)*

As the pandemic hit in March 2020 every strand of the WWTP was adapted. Much of what was learned from the adapted programme has continued to inform planning and development. The move to digital delivery increased accessibility as it allowed costs to be reduced, and the costs of travel and accommodation to be removed completely. Digital access is still a major feature of the programme.

Support for freelancers, both practical and pastoral, became particularly important as they were often impacted even harder than those who had the financial and emotional support of working for an organisation. Freelance practitioners particularly valued the warmth, kindness, care and humanity that they found in this provision.

*“Tracey has been an amazing support for so many people through the pandemic. She is like a much-needed hug! Her approach is warm, secure, safe and very creative.” (Freelance Dance Practitioner)*

Creative Practice Support Sessions facilitated by Cai Tomos, were set up by WWTP as a way of providing further support to practitioners. These sessions have continued to be an important feature of the WWTP programme and are valued by freelance practitioners.

*“The sessions were an invaluable lifeline to me during the autumn term. Work was scarce and I was losing faith in my creativity, skills and knowledge. I was looking to a career change away from the arts as I could not see a viable future for myself. The dancing and talking sessions were so valuable to remind me of why I dance, why dance is important (and essential) and that there is always a way to make it work. The sessions were expertly led and I felt supported and in safe hands throughout.” (Freelance Dance Practitioner)*

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<sup>2</sup> The recent Arts Council Wales Investment review has had a major impact on the dance sector in Wales and there is a commitment to carry out a review which will have a specific focus on community dance. Hopefully, this will recognise the interdependence and interconnectedness of the dance ecology. There is much to learn from WWTP in this process.

## Into the Future

As WWTP moves into the future and continues to develop in an organic way, it is important to emphasise the value it brings to both the dance sector as well as wider society. This is a fragmented yet interdependent sector delivering valuable services to many cross-sector organisations including the health sector. The workforce is geographically scattered across Wales and the sector is fragile, precarious and often isolated. WWTP has responded to the needs for connection and accessible opportunities to network and develop skills.

As the programme moves forward there are many opportunities to continue to grow the programme to continue to support the ecology:

- There is an opportunity to feed learning into the forthcoming review of dance to be carried out by Arts Council Wales;
- There is a growing need for dance practitioners to work in the health sector with the growth of Social Prescribing and this requires a workforce fit for purpose and able to respond to need;
- The workforce must also be nurtured so that the well-being and health of the practitioners is seen as being equally important to that of the participants they work with;
- Post-pandemic, there is a need for more proactive work to be undertaken on pay and conditions and employment practices. There are some emerging 'codes' of practice and manifestos that could be adapted and adjusted to work within Wales and WWTP is well placed to take a lead on this.

**This report was informed by data gathered by Tracey Brown, Mentoring, Training, Development Leader, Rubicon Dance and a short report written by Esther KilBride, Community Dance Practitioner, Rubicon Dance. Dr Susanne Burns drew the material together after carrying out several interviews with freelance dance practitioners.**

**Many thanks to all of the freelance dance practitioners from across Wales who have contributed to this report.**

A case study by Dr Susanne Burns is available which focuses on the Creative Practice Support Sessions aimed at freelancers and facilitated by Cai Tomos through Welsh, English or Bilingually.

<https://www.rubicondance.co.uk/cai-tomos-case-study>

There is also a case study by Dr Susanne Burns on the Wales Wide Training Programme which is available here:

<https://www.rubicondance.co.uk/wales-wide-training-programme-short-review-2013-2022>

The link below is a film made which focused on how WWTP supported freelancers throughout the pandemic.

<https://youtu.be/U0SF28NQNVU>

