

Dumfries and Galloway's Youth Arts Framework

A Call To Action

My name is Abby Gray, I'm 17 years old and currently in 6th year at Douglas-Ewart High School, and I live in Kirkcowan. I am a member of the National Youth Arts Advisory Group, a group of around 25 people between the ages of 16 and 25 who meet four times a year to advise creative bodies on what we want in Youth Arts in Scotland. We've achieved lots of things, including completely running the Edinburgh International Culture Summit earlier this year, and also running Uncon 2.0, a day long convention to celebrate youth arts in Scotland.

I am here to deliver a call to action. DG Unlimited commissioned 'A Proposed Framework for Youth Arts in Dumfries and Galloway', a report about the *condition* of youth arts in our communities. The report is published today and can be found on the DGU website. The report highlights the highs and the lows of youth arts in Dumfries and Galloway and offers 6 recommendations to youth arts providers to make it an easier and more fulfilling sector for both participants and a providers. The report came up with four key themes: Cohesion, Collaboration, Investment and Leadership, which I'll cover in more detail in just a second, and six recommendations, laying out the improvements we need to make to make Dumfries and Galloway a region at the forefront of youth arts in Scotland.

The first key area is Cohesion. The definition of this, according to Google, is "the action or fact of forming a united whole". Basically, it's how all the individual artistic people, activities and opportunities come together into the bigger picture of youth arts in Dumfries and Galloway. The report goes into detail of each individual part of this topic, but I'm just going to discuss a few. I think it became clear that there is not a lack of art opportunities, in fact, there is actually a wealth of them. However, they seem to be spread out across the whole of the region in various pockets of activity. For example, Dumfries is a very concentrated area of activity, as can be expected. However, not everyone in Dumfries and Galloway live in Dumfries, and don't

necessarily have the means of travelling there. A lot of it is to do with whether you have parents who are able and willing to drive you to opportunities, because public transport isn't always an option. I think the best solution to this is outreach. Facilitators need to realise that travelling from Dumfries to Stranraer and back, for example, takes the best part of four hours, time which young people can't always afford to give up. Rather than taking the young people to the opportunities, in an area like ours, the opportunities need to be taken to the young people.

I think collaboration is one of the best things about the arts. I know that the typical view of the artist is a solitary creature that only comes out of their house for expensive coffee and paintbrushes, but actually, I don't know one creative who doesn't yearn to share the experience of *making* with someone else. For some people, collaboration allows them to overcome personal barriers, such as confidence and creative 'blocks', as well as utilising other people's skills to bring their vision to life. I think in Dumfries and Galloway there are lots of opportunities for collaboration, but there are, of course, barriers to consider.

Obviously geographical barriers are a massive thing. Travel, especially in groups, is difficult and expensive. Travelling for distances is almost always necessary in our region, which limits many groups to not being able to leave their local area to collaborate with other people or groups. Funding for travel can also be difficult. Many groups, especially youth-led, may struggle with filling in applications for funding, as they are often complicated and require information young people may not have access to. Fundraising is another option, but again, this allows people with already-established skills in fundraising and connections with the right people to excel over others. It also means that the attitude towards arts in your local area is a factor, because if people aren't convinced art is positive, they aren't going to donate money towards the arts.

Finding people to collaborate is also a barrier that is often overlooked. Although there is an abundance of people to collaborate with, it's difficult to find them, whether

it's due to being new on the arts scene and not having any connections, not knowing how to use social media in a way that can help them, or just not knowing where to start. As is the classic scenario, *not able to get a job because of having no experience but having no experience because you can't get a job*, young people are stuck in the endless loop of not being able to collaborate because of having no connections, and having no connections because they've never collaborated.

There are ways of improving these barriers though. One way could be to encourage the use of technology in collaborations. Platforms such as Skype, Workplace, Basecamp and even Facebook can allow for groups to communicate easily without even having met. Although you have to pay for some, there are lots of free options and most of them young people will know how to use anyway. This is limited to some kinds of collaborations, such as organising an event, literature, even music, whereas other art forms, such as visual arts, are less likely to work over long distances, so that is something to consider. Also, I feel there are ways for funding to be more accessible. When applying for the National Youth Arts Advisory Group, there were about five different options on how you could submit your application. You could use images, a short film, I submitted mine as poetry. This meant people who struggled with writing could still apply through a video, or a voice clip. I think that it's important to remember that not all young people have the help of adults to fill in these applications, and that writing does not always suit everyone, and to give options to make the funds as widely accessible as possible. As for fundraising skills, I think there should be more opportunities for young people to be involved, especially at school, where often Discos and Craft Fayres are organised without the students input, meaning they aren't given a chance to experience fundraising and the best ways of doing it. Schools need to utilise the talents of their pupils and never underestimate their eagerness to learn.

The next key area is Investment, and how financial barriers are overcome in the region. This is an interesting one because from what I can see from a National point of view, on the Advisory group, every area in Scotland is coming across the same problems when it comes to investment and finance. Although there are obviously funds

available, for example The Hollywood Trust, and these should not be forgotten when talking about investment, it's also important to recognise that this way of funding is just not sustainable. I'm going to use Denmark as an example, which sounds pretty random, but recently, a group from National Youth Arts Advisory Group had an exchange with another group similar to us in Denmark. The report hasn't been published yet, so I won't go into too much detail, but they mentioned that funding works pretty differently, and that instead of constantly looking for progression on a project, funders in Denmark will see that something is working the way it is, and continue to fund it. Although this has its pros and cons, I think it's important to realise that sometimes when something works, it works, there isn't always the need to change, to get bigger and better, if it's creating an impact the way it is. I think this approach should be adopted more often; projects in Dumfries and Galloway are suffering due to the lack of funds, because perhaps the project can't progress further than it already has.

The last area is Leadership, one of the most crucial things in any youth-related project. Both adult and youth led organisations are vital in the youth arts scene, and I think Dumfries and Galloway have a great balance of both, for example Wigtown: The Festival, Big Burns Supper and Catstrand, to name a few. I think that training is essential for young people to become better leaders. Facilitating training for young people on essential leadership skills, like public speaking, social media, organisation and even first aid. Although it's a way of becoming a better leader or even a better team worker in their project, young people will also gain experiences for life, things that can help them get a job, get work experience, or get into further education. Looking into the future, young people will have gained not only social skills and team working skills, but also tangible evidence of these skills, which training can provide. As I said earlier, experience is what employers want, so young people need to access training easily from the organisations and projects that they work with, so as to improve their abilities for the organisation itself, and for the future.

For my final point, I would like to talk about a report the National Youth Arts Advisory Group have been working on. Again, it's not published yet, but I can tell you how similar these two reports are. Although the Dumfries and Galloway Youth Arts

Framework is regional, the same barriers are being faced by young people all over the country, things like finance and travel are mentioned a lot in the Advisory Group's report as well. I think what is the most important thing to take away from this is a thing we say in National Youth Arts Advisory Group a lot, which sounds quite cheesy, but "We are the now". Young people are told they are the future every day of their lives, but we need to start focussing on how we are learning, growing as people right now, so we can make a great future. We need training. We need funding. We need encouragement. We need help. It's up to you to take this report, it's six recommendations and what I've said, and sign up to it, whether it's pledging to yourself to strive to make youth arts in Dumfries and Galloway the best it can be, or whether it's literally signing up to it on the DG Unlimited website. Young artists, and all young people, are the now, please help shape youth arts as a springboard into the future.

Abby Gray (Aged 17)