

## **Welcome and thanks to delegates for attending**

Since the launch of the Music Network feasibility study report in this building back in June 2003, the report and its recommendations have been broadly welcomed and endorsed by music organisations, music education institutions and practitioners, the Arts Council, the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism, and the Department of Education and Science, which has demonstrated its support in principle through the decision to pilot the model at local level. I very much hope that that tone of positivity will prevail here today, and that together we might identify how to create the best possible conditions to ensure that the proposed national system of local Music Education Partnerships can be realised in full, on a solid and sustainable footing.

## **Recap on content of report, and progress towards implementation**

Music Network's remit is to make high quality live music available and accessible to everyone in Ireland, regardless of their location or circumstance. In striving to bring about real and meaningful access to music in Ireland, a consistent barrier to progress that we have faced over the years has been the lack of a comprehensive, state-supported music education infrastructure. It is for this reason that Music Network embarked on the process of researching and writing the feasibility study report way back in 2001.

The report identifies an existing gap within music education in Ireland, with specific reference to children's access to instrumental and vocal music education. It recommends the creation of a cost-effective national system of local Music Education Partnerships (MEPs) to deliver structured and co-ordinated music education services, which are county-based, publicly subsidised, and which complement existing school-based music education. In parallel to the local structures, the report recommends the establishment of new Music Education Council at national level to oversee the phased implementation of the local services, and to ensure consistency of quality and access from county to county.

In December 2003, Music Network presented the report to the Department of Education and Science (DES). Further to this meeting, and following an illustrative costing exercise undertaken by Music Network, the then Minister for Education and Science, Noel Dempsey, decided that the model should be piloted at local level before any decision be taken to set up any new structures at national level.

The Department originally intended to implement an MEP pilot in three locations in Ireland. However, when funding for the pilots was sanctioned there was only sufficient funding available to enable two pilot schemes to proceed.

No selection process was put in place for inclusion in the piloting process, but according to recent academic research by Karan Thompson, during the same time period the Dublin Institute of Technology was experiencing cutbacks in funding in its arts budget and was lobbying Government to address that issue at policy level. The DES has clarified that it was in the context of these discussions that the City of Dublin was designated a local MEP pilot.

Meanwhile, key organisations in Donegal had developed a partnership that mirrored the framework outlined in the Report. The local partnership had submitted to the

DES a detailed proposal document and three-year plan, and had lobbied the Department on the issue during the timeframe in which the pilot locations were under consideration. County Donegal was subsequently named as the location for the second pilot.

Funding of €100,000 per year per pilot was allocated from the DES to the County Donegal VEC and City of Dublin VEC during January 2005. A letter outlining the key features for inclusion in the pilots was sent to the CEOs of both VECs at this time. These were:

- The establishment of a partnership between the VEC and County/City Development Board focusing on primary and post-primary schools in the region
- Curriculum support for schools, with a key focus on empowering/up-skilling class teachers to become the drivers of the school-based work over time
- An emphasis on using music to enhance pupils' self esteem in schools catering for disadvantaged pupils
- Inclusion of provision for individual instrumental/vocal tuition to the extent feasible

Significantly, the letter also defined how the MEPs would operate in a local and national context and proposed management arrangements for them through an Implementation Group and subsequent to this the National Music Education Council, neither of which has, to date, materialised.

Furthermore, although the pilots have been operating since September 2005, no formal evaluation systems are in place to measure or appraise the outcomes of the pilots. This is a key stumbling block as, without a comprehensive evaluation that presents a compelling case regarding the benefits of the pilot services, the existing pilots are unlikely to be mainstreamed. Moreover, without evaluation, it is unlikely that the model will be rolled out to other areas of the country.

### **Acknowledgement of Arts Council**

Although there remains much to be done if the envisaged national system is to be achieved, I wish to pay tribute to the Arts Council for its support for the feasibility study model. Within its strategy document, "Partnership for the Arts in Practice 2006-2008", the Council expresses its commitment to "*facilitate the implementation of the feasibility study, A National System of Local Music Education Services through a multi-agency partnership at local and national levels and extend this model to other artforms*". This document also states "*Over the next three years, we will be seeking partners to work with us in advocating for the full implementation of the study*".

This current 6-month project, focused on awareness raising, networking and advocacy and being overseen by the Music Education Working Group has only been possible thanks to specific project funding from the Arts Council. The Council has also pledged to part-fund the evaluation of the existing pilots, if match funding can be sourced from the DES. I think that the leadership demonstrated by the Arts Council in proactively investing in this work is to be commended.

### **Recent contextual developments**

This is an important time for the arts in Ireland. The establishment of the Special Committee on Arts and Education was an extremely welcome development, and the Music Education Working Group has done its best to support the Committee's work, and inform them of the current needs in relation to music education. We now look forward with anticipation to reading the Committee's report, due early in May.

It is well known that a holistic music education can have an extremely positive effect on students' cognitive and personal development, but to widen the argument, and hit some key current pulse points:

- A recent report by the National Economic and Social Forum entitled "*The Arts, Cultural Inclusion and Social Cohesion*" states that, "policy in relation to arts education for young people can reap far-reaching and lasting **societal benefits** and as such, this should be central to all arts policy."
- As we all know, active participation in music making not only has positive personal outcomes for those involved, but it is also a potent means of communication and a social activity, and as such it can act as an antidote to consumerism and isolation. It can also have a cohesive effect on communities through the establishment of youth choirs, orchestras, grúpaí ceoil, etc. In short, these services have the potential to raise significantly our quality of life.

### **In conclusion**

There is, and has been for many years, a good deal of rich and valuable music education work taking place at local level in a range of genres, thanks to the passion and commitment of inspired individuals as well as the efforts of local authority arts officers, VECs, community organisations, and other service providers, some of whose experiences you will hear about later this morning. But these Trojan efforts are still not enough to ensure that all children and young people can have equal access to a holistic music education. The only way that this can happen is through a co-ordinated national system that supports and safeguards local effort; enriches local traditions; capitalises on local strengths, and adapts to local needs. And in order to achieve that we, in Music Network and the Music Education Working Group are looking to you to assist us in advocating for a well resourced, diverse and comprehensive, national system of accessible local music education. I look forward to hearing from you about how we can facilitate this process, with a view to us collectively raising the volume on this important issue.

## **Concluding thanks**

- To the MEWG for their expertise, commitment and energy in steering this 6-month project along what we hope will be a productive path. Particular thanks to the group's Chair, Aibhlín McCrann, for her huge contribution here today, and over the last number of months
- To Karan Thompson, Project Consultant, and her team, who were responsible for the logistics of planning and running this event
- The staff of Music Network, in particular Louise Walsh, PR and Marketing Manager, but also to Clare Connolly, who has helped out over the last few days
- To the Arts Council for funding this project, for its commitment to the feasibility study model, and for its ongoing support of Music Network
- To our speakers today for their insightful, highly informative presentations, and for their generosity in sharing their experiences
- To the young musicians from the pilot MEPs in County Donegal and City of Dublin for their wonderful musical contributions, which served so effectively to remind us what today, and this whole issue is all about
- To the Armoniosi Concerti for their uplifting performances, which gave such restorative relief from all of the talking
- Finally, and most importantly, to you for your passion and commitment to music education, for your ideas, feedback and advice, and for entering into the spirit of this day so wholeheartedly.

The Music Education Working Group is here until the end of June to advocate for the outcomes proposed today. Music Network remains committed beyond this time period to doing whatever we can with the resources we have to hand, to support the consolidation of existing MEPs and the development of new ones. So please keep in touch with us and let us know what is happening in your local area. If you haven't yet filled one of our Partnership Development surveys, please do so: they are available on the information desk.

Thank you once again to all of you, and hopefully this is just the beginning of an ongoing relationship with you in endeavouring to have music education valued, supported and mainstreamed so that it becomes truly accessible to all of our children and young people.