

PANEL DEBATE

“Striking the Right Note”

Music Education Partnerships

18 April 2007

Anne Woodworth (Waterford Institute of Technology) cited an example from Finland whereby distance learning in instrumental tuition is available via the internet for small groups of students (up to 4 per group). She suggested that this possibility could be investigated as a means of overcoming access issues. Another example given was www.ilearnmusic.com.

Some discussion ensued on this issue. It was acknowledged that current broadband capability in Ireland could not cope with the requirement of real-time video streaming. The issue of students learning at different speeds was also brought up, and the difficulties that this might present to the tutor. It was also agreed that online services such as this should only ever be used as a supplement, and never fully replace contact between student and teacher.

Aibhlín McCrann (MEWG Chairman/Member of The Arts Council) asked delegates what they would like to see as a key outcome from the day.

John Fitzpatrick (Co. Cork School of Music) stated that he would like to see the establishment of a national forum through which key music education issues can be addressed. He went on to assert the sound educational and structural rationale behind the VEC sector as a mechanism for providing music education at local level. The VEC model is a hugely flexible structure, adaptable to all changes, adult education, traveller education, adult literacy, music, plc courses etc. VEC structures are country wide, established, have in place procedures, allocations, equivalence of payment, contracts of indefinite duration after 4 years, qualified and un-qualified rates, schools/infrastructure available, caretaking, insurance.

There is, however, an issue in relation to the appointment of teachers – equivalence of payments etc. that needs to be addressed urgently. Qualifications and equivalency were dealt with on a case-by-case basis with the Department of Education and Science originally, and latterly with the Teaching Council. There is a lack of understanding as to how an organisation is to deal with these issues and there is a need for the national Music Education Council to work with the Teaching Council to establish an appropriate National Qualifications framework.

Eileen Herlihy (Wexford School of Music) endorsed John’s point regarding the importance of VECs in providing for music education, and argued that all children should have equal access to music education. She queried whether legal action could be taken against the State with regard to the divergence in provision from one location to another.

Rosaleen Molloy (Wexford County Council Arts Officer/MEWG) endorsed the partnership approach recommended in the feasibility study report, explaining the additional benefits of having local authorities/County Development Boards and Education Centres represented on local partnerships. This is also important in terms of reaching every school (primary and second level) via the essential curriculum support strand. She highlighted as a desired outcome from the seminar lobbying of the VEC at local level by all delegates.

Deirdre McCrea (Music Network/MEWG) explained that Seán Ó Longáin, CEO of County Donegal VEC was due to meet Áine Lawlor of the Teaching Council during the week following the seminar. She explained that Seán had specifically requested that information, feedback and issues raised from the seminar in relation to qualifications, equivalence etc. be sent to him following the seminar, to enable him to pass these on at the meeting.

Deirdre gave a brief overview of the structure of the MEPs as outlined in the feasibility study report in that the model identifies such partners as the VEC, Local Authority, City & County Development Board, Existing Providers, Second level and primary level schools, Údarás na Gaeltachta, Institutes of Technology etc. She explained that the rationale behind this partnership is to enable the pooling of resources (not only fiscal, but also in-kind) and expertise, thereby making the model more cost-effective and attractive to implement.

Deirdre outlined the MEWG's intention to develop a support pack/guidelines for prospective local MEPs, and invited suggestions as to the information tools that would be most helpful to developing MEPs.

Mary Lennon (DIT Conservatory of Music & Drama) reminded the delegates that the feasibility study is the central focus of the day's discussions. The Department of Education and Science has adopted it in principle, and its implementation on a national basis should remain the focus of the energies of the music education sector in Ireland.

Aibhlín McCrann (MEWG Chairman/Member of The Arts Council) explained that, in relation to the report currently being completed by the Special Committee on Arts and Education, music is only art form with a blueprint for future development, and a ready-made model up and running. She asserted that this should be acknowledged and implemented as a priority.

Fergus Sheil (Music Specialist, The Arts Council) spoke about the discussion that took place during the preceding breakout session in relation to partnership development, wherein the group felt that great benefit was to be derived from developing partnerships irrespective of whether funding is in place at outset. The breakout group felt that different agencies might take a lead role in different areas of provision. With this in mind, Fergus asked what can be done to consolidate the work of existing partnerships and promote the establishment of new partnerships? How can the Arts Council, Music Network and the Music Education Working Group assist this process?

Shane Brennan (Westmeath VEC) suggested that CEOs of VECs need to be informed of the provision currently taking place in County Cork VEC and through the MEPs in County Donegal and City of Dublin. He asserted that if VECs have teaching hours available, suitable tutors available and a demand for music education services, there should be nothing to stop this taking place. He advised generating media attention about the music education debate.

Jean Downey (Irish World Academy of Music and Drama/Maoin Ceol an Chláir) explained that Maoin Ceol an Chláir is currently granted 1,000 VEC hours every year, and applied for another 2,000 VEC hours a couple of years ago. Even with huge support from the VEC in County Clare, the allocation has not come through as yet and that this is due to a national allocation of hours. Despite the fact that Clare is working within a supportive VEC the committee also needs to look at how it can develop the power to create and operate a full music education service.

Paddy Healy (Teacher's Union of Ireland) asserted that the work that has been done to date is a powerful resource in advocacy. He advised the group to interview politicians on their

doorsteps in the run-up to the general election. He identified some typical politicians' techniques that are used to deflect why money is not being spent on particular areas of need. (e.g. "If I had money, that would be my first priority."). This implies that other priorities being dealt with and that funds aren't available for the issue at hand. He further commented that there are significant monies around and that, according to EU reports, the money is available to enable initiatives such as this to be implemented.

He identified the situation in Finland and that there is an excellent level of provision. "It doesn't break the country for these systems to be put in place. The problem is that they (the DES/Minister for Education and Science) have decided not to spend the money on music education."

Rosaleen Molloy (Wexford County Council Arts Officer/MEWG) explained that community forums influence the agenda for CDBs, which facilitate a co-ordinated approach to planning at local level. She advocated that delegates attending the seminar become members of their local community forum, and thereby they can urge the development of local music education structure. If this is written as part of CDB policy, then it has to be delivered. This is a practical measure towards development.

Rosaleen also highlighted the importance of local MEPs providing opportunities for life-long learning, and used the example of the Wexford Sinfonia and the associated Gateway Orchestra for training adult members.

She also highlighted the fact that within primary education, music education is not currently being serviced adequately. The delivery of the music curriculum needs to offer a valid musical experience for children who are not receiving supplementary instrumental music training.

Deirdre McCrea (Music Network/MEWG) posed a question to Muireann Ní Chonail as to whether the work of Laois School of Music has had any impact on the number of second level schools offering Music as an exam subject.

Muireann Ní Chonail (Laois County Council Arts Officer/Laois School of Music) explained that, although there are moves within County Laois VEC to address this, the impact at second level is slower than at primary level. There has been some impact, but this is slow to develop.

Dr Ita Beausang (Music Education Specialist) commended Music Network and the MEWG on its efforts in keeping the feasibility study report recommendations alive. She asserted that sustainability is key to success, and she expressed her confidence that this will become a reality via the MEP model.

Tara Connaghan (Clare County Council Arts Office) sought clarification regarding where private music schools fit into the MEP structure, and where the funding would come from at national level to subsidise the work of MEPs.

Rosaleen Molloy (Wexford County Council Arts Officer/MEWG) explained that private music schools should talk to their local VEC if they wish to offer their services to their local MEP. Negotiation of this sort needs to take place at the earliest possible stage, so that there is a shared interest/involvement in the MEP's development from outset.

Rosaleen explained that the typical profile of those accessing music tuition (i.e. those who can afford to pay) may have led to a perception within CDBs that potential MEPs are seeking only to service a middle class market. It is for this reason that the diversity in provision that

is central to the MEP model is a core argument (i.e. providing tuition in traditional and rock/pop genres as well as classical). Some CDBs do not as yet have cultural committee, which is a stumbling block to progress. By joining a local Community Forum, a demand can be created locally for the establishment of a CDB cultural committee, and processes can be put in place to advocate for the establishment of a local MEP.

Muireann Ní Chonail (Laois County Council Arts Officer/Laois School of Music) agreed that, for music education to be credible (in terms of attracting sustainable funding), it has to be inclusive. The perception prevails that music tuition is an elitist pursuit, and this needs to be effectively addressed. Currently, Laois School of Music's outreach programme is there to ensure equality, and via this programme the number of students the school reaches is multiplied many times. This is the means by which Laois School of Music ensures equality of access/social inclusion, there but it needs further development (e.g. providing services via family resource centres, use of electronic media etc). There is also the possibility of MEPs working with local Comhaltas branches to raise demand for instrumental services.

Deirdre McCrea (Music Network/MEWG) explained that the MEP model is designed with a twin-engine service provision in mind. Alongside the instrumental/vocal tuition part is the curriculum support strand, which is central to providing access to students whose families have no musical background, or who cannot afford to pay for tuition. Another means of widening access is via the provision of tuition in a range of musical genres (e.g. guitar classes tend to appeal to young boys).

The local partnership approach is important as it allows existing music teachers in an area either to opt in if they want to become part of the MEP, or opt out if they wish to remain independent.

The MEPs will provide a new layer of access to music education through curriculum support, and it is hoped that this will raise local demand for instrumental services. The MEP will not be able to cater fully for this demand, so in theory, private music tutors/schools should also benefit.

Deirdre reminded delegates that, as part of the work of the MEWG, a mapping process is in place to establish where MEPs are currently developing, and where there are organisations that would like to become involved in an MEP for the future. Questionnaires are available from Music Network, and Deirdre urged all delegates to complete one.

Rosaleen Molloy (Wexford County Council Arts Officer/MEWG) spoke in relation to advocacy with the Department of Education and Science, pointing out that the DES is currently prioritising measures to address early school leavers and young people with disabilities. Music Education can be used as a tool in relation to both of these areas, and this needs to be communicated effectively to the DES.

Deirdre McCrea (Music Network/MEWG) Deirdre pointed out that, within the MEP survey questionnaires returned to date, there is a high level of rock and pop music already being provided at local level, which could be built upon in terms of ensuring social inclusion.

Karan Thompson (Karan Thompson Consulting) responded that the MEP survey also points to a growth in music education provision in world/folk musics.

Nuala Kelly (Laois School of Music) reiterated that the key recommendation emerging from the day should be the implement the feasibility study report's recommendations.

Aibhlín McCrann (MEWG Chairman/Member of The Arts Council) thanked Nuala, and recommended that a post-seminar press release be issued, calling for the full implementation of the proposed national system of MEPs.

Anne Woodworth (Waterford Institute of Technology) stated “We do not ask – we demand – we do not need to argue this point again”. She proposed that a local media campaign be implemented, which the delegates could support, and that a groundswell of support is built, based on existing work/support at local level.

Aibhlín McCrann (MEWG Chairman/Member of The Arts Council) on behalf of the MEWG agreed to circulate common messages from the seminar, to assist people at local level to campaign, and to contact local media.

Louise Walsh (Music Network) reminded delegates that copies of the feasibility study report are available for delegates/local campaigners to send to local media. Media coverage to date is also available from Music Network, and a local press release template will be prepared for local use.

Fergus Sheil (Music Specialist, The Arts Council) encouraged all delegates to email their local candidates asking about their intentions in relation to the implementation of the feasibility study model. 2 to 3 letters to TDs and councillors can make a difference, so everyone should write and ask what is being done.

Jan Hinde (Arts Participation Specialist, The Arts Council) informed the delegates about a current advocacy initiative of the Council of National Cultural Institutions’ Education group. As part of that advocacy process, information which may be relevant to the work of the MEWG is being gathered. Jan offered to ask the CNCI Education group to share their information with the MEWG.

Deirdre McCrea (Music Network/MEWG) thanked the Arts Council for funding the MEWG’s current 6-month project. She also thanked the speakers for their input, Aibhlín McCrann for chairing the day, Karan Thompson Consulting, the internal staff of Music Network, the MEWG, the young musicians and their tutors from the MEPs in Donegal and Dublin, and the delegates for their input into the day.