

A beacon for the Islands' future: arts centre looks to strengthen community foundations

By Katie Macleod

An Lanntair's Transition Director, Claire Byers, sits on a couch overlooking the theatre. The internal walls are up, giving a wide-angle view of the arts centre's interior and the harbour beyond.

Claire is here having signed up for an 18-month contract on the island, in a role aimed at helping An Lanntair optimise its performance by 2020. "It's looking to the future," she says. "You can tell by the very nature of the word, it's a journey: a journey from where we are now to where we want to be."

Currently a Creative Scotland Foundation Organisation, An Lanntair receives core funding from Creative Scotland, and in May of this year will have to re-apply for this status, with a business plan prepared for the next five years. "We need a robust, ambitious, and believable application in to win foundation status again," outlines Claire.

Arts organisations need to be "commercially viable", delivering something of value to their audiences. As Claire explains, "We need to be doing everything we can to be sustainable, to do everything we can for public support." To facilitate this, the next few months will see a review get under way to ensure the structure of the organisation is fit for purpose.

Describing this project in the language of business – as a 'change management programme' – would be dryly obscuring the passion and enthusiasm that is powering it. Two months in and Claire is already fired up about An Lanntair's present and future promise.

"There is an extraordinary richness of talent in this building. There's a Fine Art graduate behind the bar; a member of our reception staff who is an emerging writer; someone in our office who managed London theatres; an alumni of the British Film Institute in the restaurant. Part of my role is about releasing all of that creative energy, making sure that people are playing to their strengths and projecting energy into moving forward."

Claire comments on the excitement in the air at events like the Faclan and HebCelt festivals. "We want that buzz, that mix of performances and visual arts and film and learning – I want that rich mix to come together much more often."

If anyone can harness An Lanntair's potential, it is Claire Byers. Described as "influential" and high profile" in England's north east, where she was previously based, Claire leaves behind a long string of creative and economic success stories. These range from helping Newcastle Gateshead being shortlisted as Capital for Culture in 2008,



Looking for community feedback... Transition Director, Claire Byers

and securing the first National Design Biennial for the region in 2007, to taking on the role as Deputy Director at the Baltic Centre of Contemporary Art, the first non-Tate gallery to host the Turner Prize.

Now she is engaging with everyone at all levels in An Lanntair. The first stage of the transition project will involve working with the staff and board members to come up with a new, or "refreshed", vision, that everyone can "believe in and get behind. It's important that everyone knows what we're trying to achieve, and that we're all pulling

in the same direction."

Crucially, it also involves listening to people: everyone from arts centre members to creative practitioners; those who visit An Lanntair and those who don't; and local partners such as UHI, MG Alba and HIE. "We're talking to as many people as we can to visualise what we do well, what we could do better, and where they see the real value of An Lanntair."

"We need to shine brighter, be a beacon of creativity," Claire enthuses. It's an apt image,

given that An Lanntair translates to 'lantern' or 'beacon' in English. "There's an idea of it illuminating, shining a light on something, but it also can be about providing knowledge and inspiring people."

An Lanntair is already important in stimulating wider artistic activity across the island, and even in an international context. As an arts venue, they showcase the best of local talent, but also bring big global stars to the stage, as was the case with the sell-out Russian Ballet Gala in December.

"An Lanntair has a view that reflects rich cultural roots but is outward looking and sees the world," says Claire. "Rather than see the island as on the edge of the Atlantic, or at the edge of Scotland, it's actually central to a much bigger world."

"Extraordinary things are going on inside and outside the building," she says, adding that more than 5000 individuals are involved in An Lanntair's educational outreach programmes, "from the under fives to over 55's."

Whether it's formal or informal, with dementia sufferers or schoolchildren, film club or life drawing, An Lanntair is connecting with the community. "The future of An Lanntair lies in that generosity of creativity, how we work with people and support a healthy creative ecology across the islands."

Because An Lanntair requires complex programming – making one space work for performances, music, film, and visual art – it is essential that audiences know what to expect from the arts centre. "We need them to be confident in the quality of delivery from the arts centre, to trust that what we do will be something of value," Claire says. And that value is not simply about the entertainment value of their services, but the social aspects too - from the educational outreach programmes to the restaurant and bar.

Claire is "really impressed and really excited" about An Lanntair and its transition. "Little things can make a big difference," she adds, with a nod to the raised walls, a small alteration that subtly transforms the atmosphere. Sitting here, the scene could easily compete with a contemporary arts venue in any cosmopolitan city.

The new Transition Director's enthusiasm for An Lanntair's creative potential is infectious. "My job is to help An Lanntair shine brighter," Claire says with a smile, "and in doing so help it have a brighter future."

An Lanntair welcomes feedback from everyone, whether regular visitors to the arts centre or not. To get in touch, email claire@lanntair.com with any thoughts, comments, or ideas.

Getting entwined with amusing photographs

Review by Fred Silver

Small is beautiful, it was famously said, and this is certainly true of a new local publication. At 120mm by 90mm, *101 Uses of Baler Twine* by Frank Rennie, is a perfect gem. Yes, it's about baler twine but not as you know it!

The book has more than 100 pages of pictures of baler twine - but in locations you may never have considered. Baler twine as a dog leash is quite obvious, perhaps, but making a cloutie dumpling? Or what about presenting a medal or sealing the archives?

The book is in Gaelic and English throughout

with a short personal introduction by Frank Rennie explaining how the pictures and the book as a whole started out as a family joke.

It's certainly very amusing and a great antidote to winter's gloom. It was published before Christmas but for most people it's missed its role as a stocking-filler - but it would be an ideal purchase with a book token or that bit of money you found down the back of the sofa on Boxing Day.

101 Uses of Baler Twine by Frank Rennie is only £4.99 from locally based publishers Acair.

