

Celtic Neighbours

Report on activities 2019

2019 was a year of new beginnings for Celtic Neighbours. Following the thorough and very successful review process led by Dermot McLaughlin of Creative Solutions in Dublin (<http://www.celtic-neighbours.eu/strategies--strategaethau.html>), we were able to develop discussions with our friends and stakeholders, and focus on the key strengths of the organisation – facilitating ‘creative collisions’ between communities, organisations and amateurs in the smaller-language nations of Europe, drawing together and sustaining cultural collaborations, and providing the energy and expertise to empower the development of new collective initiatives.

Two changes in personnel marked the move into a new period of development for the organisation. After eleven years of service, Micheál O Ferraigh stepped down as Chair, to be succeeded by Darach O Tuarsaig, Chief Executive of Fíabín in Connemara. At the same time, Meic Llewellyn who had worked in harness with Micheál since the organisation began, stepped back as Co-ordinator to be succeeded by Bethan Morgan. Both Micheál and Meic have maintained their involvement with Celtic Neighbours, Micheál as a consultant and Meic as a director. Recruitment of a new co-ordinator took place throughout the three Celtic nations between February and April 2019, and Bethan was appointed on 1st May. A transition and mentoring process took place between May and August, during which period Bethan was supported by the three directors based in Wales, Dwywnwen Lloyd Llywelyn of Theatr Felinfach, Gwyn Jones of Oriel Plas Glyn y Weddw and Meic Llewellyn.

In June and July, Bethan undertook a three-nation research and networking project that took her to Cornwall, Brittany and the Basque Country in quick succession. The first UK National Minority Summit took place on the 5th of July, and Bethan was a delegate. Minority languages from across the UK, including Jerriais (the old Norman spoken on Jersey) and



Romany were represented. She made contact with many delegates, and has already collaborated with some – especially Elin Haf Gruffydd Jones from Mercator in Wales and Wil Coleman from Golden Tree Productions in Cornwall - while others will be involved in future projects, including Dick Cole and Denziel Mark from Radyo An Gernewegva in Brittany.

In Brittany shortly afterwards she attended An Seisiún, a festival of Irish music in Mesquer, She made contact

with Irish and Breton musicians who could participate in the upcoming 'Cymru yn Ewrop' festival in Machynlleth, and other collaborations in the future. After the festival she went to Nantes, where she met Pierre-Emmanuel Marias, who is in charge of linguistic diversity and the Breton language on Nantes city council. He also expressed great interest in attending the 'Cymru yn Ewrop' festival. The last Breton rendez-vous was with an old acquaintance Yves Averty, who updated her on the 'Kejadenn' venture, the ambitious and ground-breaking project of a modern Breton language and cultural centre in the city.

<https://www.acb44.bzh/index.php/kejadenn>

Next she travelled to the Basque Country, where Bethan was able to meet many of Celtic Neighbours' historic friends and partners, including Igor Otxoa from Txalap.art, Jurdana Martin from Topagunea in Donostia and Ana Anduexa from Plazaola in Lekunberri. All three of these had played important roles in the TOSTA project, which Celtic Neighbours had coordinated. Ana facilitated visits and meetings with the artist Juan Goritti, the folk dancer Mikel Lasarte, and members of the town council in neighbouring Leitza, with a view to future collaborations.

Many of these meetings very quickly evolved into concrete collaborations, as Menter Iaith Maldwyn had approached Celtic Neighbours for support for their 'Cymru yn Ewrop' festival in September 2019. Fred ha Fanch, Breton musicians; Jean Lucas, representing Pierre-Emmanuel Marais; Elin Haf Gruffydd Jones from Mercator and three members of Leitza town council were among those who came to Machynlleth to play at concerts, run workshops and participate in round table discussions. Further networking visits to Scotland and Ireland are planned for early 2020.

The changes described at the beginning of the report, and the review process that preceded them were necessary and extremely valuable, and will lead on to energetic interventions in the future. At the same time, both processes in the short term reduced the organisation's capacity to instigate, inform and drive new collaborations, an activity we're determined now to revive. For much of 2019, therefore, we have concentrated on supporting two initiatives that will lead in 2020 to a second generation of collaborative cultural initiatives. The first is Oró, a project built into the Galway European Capital of Culture celebrations and led by our friends and colleagues Ealain na Gaeltachta. The second has been planning a three-day gathering in Scotland, to take place in October 2020, bringing together activists of all kinds working in cultural collaboration and language promotion in minoritised language communities across Western Europe. There we are determined to help launch a tranche of new collaborations. We'll describe these two initiatives in turn.



Oró is a collaborative project drawing together performers from smaller languages to meet, devise and then perform a series of shows built around the sung and spoken word, as a central element in the Galway European Capital of Culture celebrations in summer 2020. The initiative is partly modelled on the very successful TOSTA project, forged between 2015 and 2016, which brought musicians, visual artists and language agencies from seven cultures together in a celebration tour. Celtic Neighbours co-ordinated that project in collaboration with the Donostia/San Sebastian European Capital of Culture committee, and it led on to further collaborations based in Leeuwarden for the Friesland celebrations in 2018. Oró has, however, developed as a far more centralised project than those described above, offering rather less shared ownership to participants, and also making greater financial demands on organisations than some are able to meet. As a result, some long-term partners such as Golden Tree Productions in Cornwall and La Mesa in Galicia have withdrawn, but we at Celtic Neighbours are committed to supporting the project as it continues to evolve. During 2019, therefore, we have contributed to the pre-production processes by suggesting and contacting potential performers, and also by exploring with partners and funding agencies whether the financial imbalances can be bridged, particularly in Scotland and Wales.



During 2019 we also recognised the need to sustain cultural momentum by supporting current initiatives, and this year we have worked primarily in the field of music. We have called this collection of activities ‘Llysgenhaddon/ Ambassadors’, as musicians and poets are natural ambassadors, ‘ambassadors of the word’, natural sharers whose art, experience and training

open them to dialogue, interaction and the development of new opportunities and relationships. This is especially true of practitioners of the traditional arts, steeped in their native culture and always eager to admire and learn from the culture of others. So we have worked with organisations in Wales to create a pan-Celtic and international element in several festivals and other events that bring musicians and poets together in



performance situations. Within this project we have supported 'Gŵyl y Pethau Bychain' and 'Cymru yn Ewrop' over the past two years, and our chief input so far has been to bring performers from Ireland, Cornwall, Scotland, Brittany, Galicia, the Basque Country and Poland. In partnership with 'Pam Lai?' we have also supported visits by Welsh performers, including a community choir, groups and solo musicians, to Ireland and the Basque Country.

The support we've been giving over twelve months is already bearing fruit: new partners in Cornwall are preparing to welcome tours from other nations, a collaboration between poets from the Celtic nations is taking shape, and a collaboration between rural town councils in the Basque Country and Wales will lead, we hope, to production of a case study report on ways of supporting both cultural and environmental diversity, which we will share with colleagues and communities throughout our network and beyond.

These activities have been useful and productive, but we're aware that they do not reflect the wider networking priorities of Celtic Neighbours. Although we have been acting as a fulcrum for trans-cultural collaborations, we haven't this year been offering communities the ownership in shared initiatives, and building capacity and aspiration in the way that only shared undertakings can. However, we do hope that the groundwork undertaken during this year of adaptation and transition is already beginning to have an effect, and that the new fruits already developing will be harvested by our partners and stakeholders in the near future.

Meic Llewellyn, Director.