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Arts Development UK: making it work for their membership

With the Arts Development UK seminar programme in full swing, The Leisure Review spoke to Pete Bryan of ADuk about how the organisation has evolved to meet the needs of its members and serve the wider interests of the arts.

Arts Development UK is now into its third year under its new banner. Formerly known as the Nalgao, or, more rarely, the National Association for Local Government Arts Officers, the organisation has managed to continue its work in support of arts development and grow its membership during these most difficult of times for the arts in local government settings.

Pete Bryan, ADuk's administrator, is well aware of the problems that those working in the field of arts development are facing. He is also aware of the demands that such challenges place on ADuk members and is pleased to explain how the organisation has been able to respond.

"The organisation changed its name from Nalgao to reflect the change in the nature of the organisation and also to reflect the growing complexity of local authority arts development support," he says. "Not all local authorities have arts services, because of course it's a non-statutory service, but over the years, as a result of reorganisation and pressures on budgets, quite a few have changed the way they directly manage arts and cultural services. Some have outsourced those services into independent trusts; others might have commissioned new organisations to takeover arts services that were traditionally managed in house.

"As well as arts development within local authorities becoming quite complex, we were also starting to attract other organisations into membership that were not directly connected to a local authority. We wanted to reflect that so we changed the name to Arts Development UK so that any organisation or individual interested in developing arts at a local level can join us. They might be an individual, perhaps an artist or consultant working in the sector, for example. We still have a considerable number of local authorities in membership – about two thirds of our membership – but about one third are independent regional or national arts organisations or personal members."

Students are offered a discounted membership and the organisation also has a discounted rate for those members who might be between jobs or retired. Membership bands reflect the diverse nature of the organisation's membership, including organisational membership and group membership for organisations with larger staffing structure. Individuals can join via personal membership.

However, as Bryan explains, changes to the organisation went deeper than a new name and revised membership categories.

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“We are now a lot more open about who the organisation is aimed at but we changed the nature of the organisation at the same time,” Bryan says. “We are now a registered charity, a company limited by guarantee, and we’ve become a professional organisation, offering a support system to a membership whose main focus is local arts development.”

This new approach includes a fellowship programme which offers ADuk members the opportunity to earn credits for different aspects of their work and professional development. This scheme then allows members to classify themselves as associate fellows, full fellows or senior fellows. Credits are earned over the course of a calendar year but can be carried over from one year to the next.

As Bryan explains, the fellowship scheme helps encourage members to be active and engaged, and conscious of the value of their continuing professional development. “It is rewarding them for the activities they undertake, whether these are informal or specific activities. It offers an opportunity to be rewarded for the professional development you undertake as part of your work or as part of your interest in the arts throughout the year. It has proved very popular. About a third of our membership is registered for the scheme.”

Other membership services provided by ADuk include a skills and knowledge bank accessed via the organisation’s website. This part of the professional development area of the site invites members to list some of their skills and competencies with a view to sharing them with fellow members. This has created a simple skills matrix that serves as an informal network of experience that can be accessed by members. The organisation also offers an induction for new members and can provide access to a buddying system for anyone who might like the help of a more experienced colleague working in a similar field or location.

Such services, the Leisure Review suggests, are quite sophisticated for an organisation that operates with such a small footprint.

Bryan agrees. “The structure of the organisation has developed over the years,” he says. “It has to be fit for purpose. We try to support our members as much as possible and then on top of that we organise regional seminars, a minimum of two a year, and a national conference, which this year is in Cardiff at the Welsh Millennium Centre on 16-17 October.

“The organisation is governed by board of trustees – nine at the moment – and then the national committee composed of regional coordinators, two for each region in England and six representing Wales. There are ten areas in England – the old pre-review Arts Council areas – and three regions in Wales. Those people are tasked with attending a national committee quarterly and calling two regional meetings a year. This helps with regional networking and means we have a good network within the organisation. The trustees know what’s happening in each region and the regional coordinators know what is happening with the policy development and direction of the organisation.”

The policy work of the organisation includes a focus on advocacy and networking, which involves ADuk working quite closely with Arts Council England, the Local Government Association and with the Department www.theleisurereview.co.uk

for Culture, Media and Sport. They also coordinate the National Leisure and Culture Forum, the networking forum that includes most if not all professional associations in England representing the cultural sector, and manage the Leading Learning Programme on their behalf. Meanwhile, ADuk membership is growing and its programme of seminars and conferences continues to thrive.

Bryan agrees that ADuk operates with quite a lean structure but stresses that it is the commitment and engagement of the membership that makes this both possible and appropriate. It is also cost-effective.

“We are specifically a membership organisation and members get out of the organisation as much as they put in,” he says. “We are driven by the members and we don’t have a workforce. ADuk actually has no staff as I work on fee basis and I work from home. We don’t have any overheads or equipment, although we do have an additional administrative assistant who works on a similar fee basis. The power of the organisation come through our members, our national committee, our regional coordinators and trustees.

“It is a very equitable organisation and the governance of ADuk is quite strong. There is a considerable wealth of experience within our membership, which is a great help with CPD [continuing professional development] but it also enables us to share and profile what’s happening with arts development across the UK.”

For many people familiar with the machinations of organisations and associations across the sport, leisure and culture sector over the years, such an approach is likely to come as a relief. So many organisations, the Leisure Review suggests, seem to take a staff and a headquarters as a starting point before considering what their members want.

“We actually tried that a few years ago,” Bryan says. “We had an Arts Council grant, which gave us the possibility of employing somebody almost as a chief executive. I’m not saying it didn’t work but to a large extent it was unnecessary. Rather than paying someone to do it, we rely on our membership and it works very well for us. We don’t have any costly chief executive or director positions. I’m an administrator – although I probably do a bit more than admin – but the networking that goes on is not down to one person, a CEO. It happens through our membership.”

While every membership organisation says that its strength lies in its membership, few actually demonstrate it in practice but the structure of ADuk suggests that in this case the claim might have some substance.

“I think we’ve embraced it and that is perhaps why we are growing,” Bryan says. “As more people come on board, more people understand that you do get out what you put in. You can be as passive or as active as you like, but obviously we like active members. We are a charity and our regional coordinators are not paid to take on those responsibilities. They are voted in by membership and the positions are honorary. Apart from me and my admin assistant, everyone else is voluntary.”

With the ADuk national seminars almost sold out and with encouraging interest in the national conference later in the year, it seems that the ADuk model is working and working hard on behalf of its members.

Many larger organisations might do well to take note.

Full details of Arts Development UK, including the membership, the national seminar programme on cultural commissioning and the annual conference in Cardiff at the Welsh Millennium Centre on 16-17 October, can be found at artsdevelopmentuk.org

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