**Celtic Neighbours Partnership**

**Annual report 2012**

Celtic Neighbours is the cultural development agency working across the Celtic world and beyond to stimulate, support and sustain collaborations and innovation in our native languages. Since 2005 we have been active across borders and art-forms, working with production companies, community groups, arts centres, other support agencies and independent artists to empower and co-ordinate a wide range of enterprises in our native languages. In the last two years, we have begun to seek understandings and relationships with active agencies in other minority cultures across Europe, while still prioritising our key constituencies in the Celtic world.

**Committee, directors and staffing:**

The composition of our management committee, with its seven named executive directors and five consultants, has remained the same. We have consulted regularly through telephone conferences, and sub-groups have met three times this year to advance specific discussions. We will hold our next full committee meeting next June at Sabhal Mor Ostaig in Skye. Since Sioned Best’s enforced retirement through family illnesses in January 2011, our Co-ordinator has dealt with administration and financial management as well as his project development duties, supported in particular by our Vice-Chair. He has indicated that as our financial situation becomes more secure, he will be happy to share his current load with another member of staff.

Many of our directors and consultants are extremely active and involved in the organisation’s work, and their energy and expertise are among our greatest strengths. To take even greater advantage of this resource, we have been drafting a committee skills audit, which will be circulated along with this report and the annual financial statement, and will be grateful if all committee members could complete and return it.

**Project work:**

The development and support of collaborative enterprises is the life-blood of this network, so we will report on this aspect of our work first. Over the last year, three major projects have come to their culmination, and all were successful. The ‘Branwen’ project brought two groups of young people, and facilitators from three countries, together to devise and realise a drama, dance and music collaboration in County Kerry; see a full report and analysis at <http://www.celtic-neighbours.eu/documents/branwen.pdf>. The ‘Tair/ Triuir’ collaboration between three (and later six) female traditional singers ended with a triumphant ten-concert tour of Ireland in April of this year; it achieved much, while raising some challenging questions about future directions. A report can be found at <http://www.celtic-neighbours.eu/documents/Tair%20final%20report.pdf> . Finally, the ‘Tír’ visual arts collaboration came to an end after three years of creation, curation, touring and workshopping at the Pan-Celtic Festival in Carlow this summer. The concluding report is also available at <http://www.celtic-neighbours.eu/documents/T%C3%ADr%20final%20report_2.pdf>  Organisations which, through taking part in one or more of these activities, have been drawn into the wider network as active partners include [Fèisean nan Gàidheal](http://www.feisean.org/en/index.php) and Sabhal Mor Ostaig in Scotland, AnÓg, Aras Eanna and Ionad an Bhlascaoid Mhóir in Ireland, and Oriel Plas Glyn-y-Weddw and Y Tabernacl in Wales.

As these initiatives have been reaching their full term, a new range of activities has been developing. The pilot exchange in ‘Blas’, a tailored work-experience project to help young people in the native-language communities eager to work in the cultural industries, will be spearheaded by Theatr Felinfach and Fíbím in Spring 2013. The first of two pilot event weekends to popularise the Irish ‘Culture Night’ concept in Wales and later in Scotland took place in Mid-Wales this October and will be followed by another, in South-East Wales next April. The first stage in a project twinning small festivals in native-language areas brought musicians and committee members from Aai in Frŷslan in the Netherlands to North Wales in September, and will be followed by a return event in Frŷslan over Easter 2013.

### While maintaining our primary involvement in grassroots activity across the Celtic world, we have also begun to develop learning collaborations with groups working in minority-language cultures across Europe. With support from [Ealaín na Gaeltachta](http://www.ealain.ie/culra/indexb.html) and the Arts Council of Ireland, we are planning a short conference and series of events in February 2013 which we hope will lead to the development of a major travelling exhibition examining the role of coastal and island communities in our culture. This project is already attracting interest from potential partners in Ireland, Wales, Galicia, the Basque Country, Frŷslan and Bulgaria; we hope also to include participants from the Faeroe Islands and elsewhere. Led by Theatr Felinfach and A-Fûk in Frŷslan, we are also beginning to explore the possibility of creating a partnership that will examine grassroots arts activity, and the best ways to support it, in a number of small communities across Europe, through the collaborative production of community cultural audits. We are already talking to potential participants in the Basque Country and Ireland, and hope to expand the group further as the project develops.

Finally, we have been increasingly involved in supporting collaborations led by other organisations in an advisory capacity, and in brokering initiatives that will develop independently of us. We have supported a fact-finding an networking visit to Wales by Uist Wool in the Hebrides, and a similar exploration of contacts in Dingle by a coalition planning an interpretation centre in North Wales. We have helped develop a process through which Creative Services in Skye and Bòrd na Gàidhlig are drawing in aspects of Welsh practice in teaching dance through the native language. We have facilitated meetings between the national youth theatres of Wales and Ireland, and assisted in the development of music and story-telling events in both those countries. We have supported research into network development led by the Carnegie UK Trust over the past two years, and are supporting the development of a European network of coastal museums and interpretation centres in smaller-language areas We would like to thank those who have extended financial support over this period, in particular the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, the Carnegie UK Trust, ColmCille, Creative Scotland and the Arts Councils of Wales and Ireland. Without the on-going logistical support provided with such generosity by [Ealaín na Gaeltachta](http://www.ealain.ie/culra/indexb.html) , all the work described above would also have been greatly impoverished.

**The Celtic Neighbours Gathering:**

Plans have been advancing throughout this year to hold a major conference and showcase celebrating and examining cultural production in the Celtic and other minority cultures, to be held at Sabhal Mor Ostaig in Skye at the end of June 2013. The planning process is being led by a specially-constituted Scottish conference committee, and fund-raising and event design are now both in progress. We hope to combine this event with a youth dance and drama event which would help draw young people into the heart of the gathering.

**Financial matters:**

Audited financial statements, broken down into income and expenditure on specific project areas and also core activities, are circulated with this report. Spending on both ‘Branwen’ and ‘Tir’ remained within our estimates, and on ‘Tair/ Triuir’ only exceeded them very slightly. Fund raising for both our emerging projects and the Gathering are proceeding positively. It is crucial, though, that urgent attention is given to achieving secure funding for our core activities – the Co-ordinator’s fees and expenses, communications, translation and reportage. Without this work taking place, development of project and networking activities would be almost impossible, and over the part year it has been dependent on generous one-off grants from Creative Scotland and the Arts Council of Wales. This support is now close to exhaustion, and for the organisation to continue to thrive it is urgent that the directors and committee employ their energies and expertise to resolving this issue.

**Communications and marketing:**

The Celtic Neighbours website continues to be a useful and central part in our information-sharing activities. Attempts to develop communications through a Ning and later a Facebook site have been less successful, failing to attract a critical mass either of our core partners or the wider network odf stakeholders into their readership. The bi-annual newsletter, which we produce in four languages, has been distributed electronically to a wide range of groups, and has been very positively received. Regular telephone conferencing, both of the management group as a whole and between groups concentrating on specific issues, has also been very useful throughout the year. Participation in the Carnegie UK Trust’s networking research group has served to demonstrate what we were already aware of: that Celtic Neighbours is a highly successful example of an active network model, in which face-to-face contacts are crucial and shared involvement in activities provides the cement for group cohesion, and we have been used by the Carnegie as an exemplar of this model. We have not yet found an entirely successful way of extending our communications through social networking sites or other new technologies, and the introduction of new skills and energies may be necessary to achieve this breakthrough.

**Conclusions:**

The period 2011 – 12 has been one of great achievement and considerable growth. Three major projects have been brought to successful conclusions, in each case with positive and measurable effects on the host communities and the people involved. The network continues to grow in both breadth and influence, and important new relationships are being developed. We are working harmoniously and effectively with other active in the field. We have a very exciting conference to look forward to in 2013, and the broadening of our horizons to emcompass collaborations with similar groups across Europe is both challenging and useful. There are problems and issues to approach too, however. Coverage of our home communities is still patchy: weaker across Scotland than either Wales or Ireland, and weak too in southern Wales and the bigger cities if Ireland. Above all, though we have been highly successful in achieving project funding and building warm relationships with our funders there, the weakness of our core funding is an areaof grave concern that needs immediate attention.