

**Folk Education Network
Folk Education Development Day**

**Cecil Sharp House
Saturday 21st March 2026**



Adapting Folk Dance with Older People



Photos by Rachel Elliott

Report by Rhian Davies

I attended the Folk Education Development Day: Adapting Folk Dance with Older People with my daughter, and two colleagues from the Arts Council of Wales. Our main reason for attending was to gain experience and advice on how to develop more folk-dance sessions for the elderly within Welsh folk dancing. A number of folk-dance groups in Wales are getting older so we were keen to get ideas of how we can keep them engaged and continue to incorporate them in our dance practice.

We are particularly keen to develop cross-generational projects and have started to do this by giving our TwmpDaith members training on how to adapt Welsh Twmpath dances (“toom-path” – Welsh social folk dances similar to ceilidhs or barn dances) to participate in chairs for Dance 4 Parkinsons groups. Our aim is to use our new knowledge learnt at this training day to develop an idea around a “Walking Twmpath”.

The day was very well organised with a clear agenda and exciting programme of speakers and practitioners. Our ‘Welsh contingency’ was immediately welcomed into the group by EFDSS staff Kerry Fletcher (Folk Education Network Manager), Jen Cox (Dance Development Manager) and Rachel Elliott (Education Director) and it was great to be part of such a varied array of people. Some very experienced and some new to the practice. My daughter is at the beginning of her journey as a dance practitioner and found the day very inspiring.

The first workshop with Mary Panton (Freelance social folk dance caller and teacher) was just up our street. We much prefer a hands-on practical style of teaching, rather than sitting and listening. Mary obviously had a wealth of experience calling and teaching dance to the elderly and it was great to learn and discuss practical tips of how to adapt some moves that elderly or less mobile people may struggle with, i.e. spinning or dancing backwards. Her session enabled us to think of ways to adapt small parts of dances to make them inclusive without having to change the dance altogether.

The second workshop with Anna Leatherdale (Executive Director, Qualifications, People Dancing) was a beautiful session teaching us about the importance of warm-ups and breathing, and how people naturally copy movement that is demonstrated by others. It’s contagious and you don’t always need words. This was an interesting lesson to learn – as words and speech may confuse some elderly dancers or people with memory loss or dementia – and so we were encouraged to follow visual cues instead (which had a very calming effect on the group). This is in contrast to our Dance 4 Parkinsons practice where repetition is encouraged. We learnt that we need to constantly adapt our practice depending on the needs of the individuals in the group.

The third workshop with Jo Harmer, Tom Gregory and the FolkActive Team was a wonderful session. It was really interesting to see how they ‘theme’ their sessions and can imagine how this would very easily be transferred to our Welsh dance practice. Jo led a session with us on a ‘Going to the Fair’ theme, interspersing the session with folk songs, stories, folk music, dance demonstrations and varied dance activities all around the ‘fair’ theme. They introduced great ideas for props, such as handkerchiefs to participate in a sitting down ‘morris style dance’, to handing out wooden spoons to join as percussion for the live folk music. This session showed the importance of including live musicians in our sessions, that enriches the sessions greatly and is also much more adaptable for the target audience.

I think our main take away from Mary's session would be that we can include adaptations at all twmpaths when we are calling to simplify parts to make all our dances more inclusive. Anna's session taught us to quieten down. In a live setting with music and dancing – there are so many senses being stimulated it can sometimes be overwhelming. I have learnt that you don't always need to talk and instruct. People will follow a lead or example.

The main take away from the FolkActive session was the value of a good 'theme' for a session and taking the essence of that theme or dance to create lots of different activities. Having a box of tricks and props makes it easy to include people of all abilities in the session in some way or another.

My word to describe the day after the Round Up Discussion at the end was 'delicious'! It was a warm, informative, fun, interactive day that left us all inspired and itching to get back to start planning our next project and incorporating a lot of the ideas taught by all the speakers.

Rhian Davies is co-ordinator of 'Prosiect Wyth' – a Welsh Arts Council Funded Project to promote traditional Welsh Dancing. Passionate about all things to do with the Welsh folk scene, she is a Welsh folk dancer, clogger and 'twmpath' caller, and teaches clog dancing to local children in North Powys. As part of her work with 'Prosiect Wyth' she developed 'TwmpDaith' – based on a similar Scottish project called the 'Ceilidh Trail', where a Welsh Twmpath Supergroup is formed every summer consisting of 9 young dancers and musicians. It's a fun packed summer job for the young people and following a week of intensive training they embark on a month-long tour of Wales in a minibus hosting twmpaths at festivals and village halls.

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