

2013



# Developing Community Circus in Aotearoa New Zealand: Key Research Findings

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Funded by the Lotteries Community Sector Research  
Fund

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**Cover page photo:**

**Circus Kumarani performing for Cirque du Soleil members 2007**

# Introduction

This report presents the main findings of a two year research project from 2011 to 2013, which aims to support the development of community circus in Aotearoa New Zealand. It summarises the background to the research, its purpose, components and key findings. The report's intention is to support those connected with community circus in New Zealand to use this research to further its growth and development.

## Background to the research

The Lotteries Community Sector Research Fund approved a joint research proposal in 2010 from Dargaville based Circus Kumarani ([www.circuskumarani.co.nz](http://www.circuskumarani.co.nz)) and Auckland based researcher Rachael Trotman. This fund supports partnerships between community organisations and researchers, to undertake research to achieve community benefits. The research project team also included community circus practitioners Frances Kelliher and Thomas Hinz ([www.communitycircus.co.nz](http://www.communitycircus.co.nz)) and researcher Alex Woodley of Point Research ([www.pointresearch.co.nz](http://www.pointresearch.co.nz)).



Northland Circus Festival 2013

## Purpose

The purpose of the research is to support the development of community circus in Aotearoa New Zealand. The research project explored these questions.

- What is community circus and how does it differ from other forms of circus?
- What benefits does community circus provide and to whom?
- What does good practice in delivering community circus involve?
- What is effective in evaluating community circus?
- What is the 'current state' of community circus in New Zealand?
- How can community circus flourish in New Zealand?



**Interact Disability Festival, Auckland 2011**

## Research components

The research involved the following components.

Method/component	Description
<b>National online survey</b>	In April 2011 an online survey was sent by email to 114 people connected with community circus in New Zealand, with a 60% response rate (68 people). Respondents were asked to describe community circus, its target audiences, benefits and national strengths, needs, priorities and opportunities.
<b>Literature review</b>	In 2012 an international literature review was completed on what community circus is, its reported benefits, good practice and how to sustain and evaluate community circus activity. Implications for community circus in New Zealand were also explored.
<b>Evaluation of four community circus programmes</b>	<p>In 2012/13 the following New Zealand community circus programmes were evaluated:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. An Auckland based all ages, all abilities community circus programme involving adults with mental health experience and intellectual disabilities, deaf children and young people and children aged four to thirteen, which resulted in two public performances of a show called 'Circolina's Leap' (see <a href="http://www.communitycircus.co.nz">www.communitycircus.co.nz</a> for a youtube clip of the programme and performances). This programme was provided by Auckland Community Circus<sup>1</sup></li><li>2. Circus Kumarani's Dargaville based SKIP programme for pre-schoolers – a community circus programme for under 5 year olds provided in partnership with the SKIP programme (Strategies with Kids, Information for Parents)</li><li>3. Circus Kumarani's community circus programme with a class of 8 to 10 years olds at Dargaville Primary School, during Term Two in</li></ol>

<sup>1</sup> For more on Auckland Community Circus see [www.communitycircus.co.nz](http://www.communitycircus.co.nz).

	2012
	4. Circus Kumarani's 'Northland Stars' community circus programme, for 'high achievers' in circus skills Northland wide.
<b>Workshop</b>	In February 2012 a workshop was held with around thirty participants at the Auckland Circus Convention in Henderson, Auckland, on what community circus needs to thrive in New Zealand. The findings from this workshop are included in the report containing the stakeholder interviews, described below.
<b>Stakeholder interviews</b>	In 2012, 17 interviews were undertaken by phone and face to face with community circus leaders. Eleven of these interviews were with national leaders and six with representatives of key international organisations (Cirque du Soleil, American Youth Circus Organisation, Belfast Community Circus, Australian Circus and Physical Theatre Association, Finland Social Circus and the European Youth Circus Organisation).

Please refer to the individual reports for each of the components above, which are accessible at [www.circuskumarani.co.nz](http://www.circuskumarani.co.nz) or [www.communitycircus.co.nz](http://www.communitycircus.co.nz). The report titles are:

- Developing Community Circus in Aotearoa New Zealand: A Survey of the National Community Circus Sector (2011)
- Building Character and Community - Community Circus: a Literature Review (2012)
- Evaluation of Circolina's Leap – A Community Circus Programme (2012)
- Evaluation of a Community Circus Skills Programme at Dargaville Primary School (2013)
- Evaluation of the SKIP Community Circus Programme in Dargaville (2013)
- Summary Overview of Northland Stars: A Community Circus Programme (2013)
- Developing Community Circus in Aotearoa New Zealand: Ideas and Observations from Community Circus Leaders (2013).

# Key findings

The key findings are drawn from the analysis of all of the findings from the research components above.

## What is community circus?

Community circus is a social art form that uses circus skills to promote personal and social development.

Circus skills generally fall into five categories:

1. Acrobatics – tumbling, balance and contortion
2. Aerial arts – trapeze, ropes, silks, webs
3. Equilibristics – stilts, rola-bola, globe, unicycle, tightrope and cyr wheel
4. Object manipulation – juggling, hula hoop, diabolo, poi, flower sticks, spinning plates
5. Drama – clowning, comedy, mime.



Circability workshops at TAPAC in Auckland, 2012. Photographer Karen Abplanalp

As well as learning circus skills, participants of community circus usually apply what they have learnt in a public performance of some kind.

Community circus is also known as 'social circus' nationally and internationally, but community circus seems to be the most commonly used term in New Zealand. What distinguishes community circus from other forms of circus is:

- Its participatory nature
- It is open and accessible to all
- It connects people from all backgrounds and abilities
- It provides community and personal benefits
- It engages those on the margins and provides an alternative to traditional sports and art forms.



**Circolina's Leap performers, Auckland, 2012**

## Who is community circus for?

Worldwide, community circus is open to all but is mostly undertaken with children and young people. Community circus also appeals to adults of all ages, as a way to keep fit, learn new skills, build confidence, meet others or spend time with their children or community.

Community circus is attractive to most children from babies upwards, given its emphasis on colour, fun, movement, humour, the range of equipment and activities involved and its participatory nature.

Community circus also appears to hold special appeal to marginalised groups – youth (at risk), people with disabilities and emotional, mental health, learning and/or behavioural issues. As a 'non-mainstream' art form, circus offers something different, unique, 'cool', interesting and outside of the norm to be part of. As such, community circus has the ability to provide a place to belong and connect people across divides of age, socioeconomic status, gender, ability, opinion, ethnicity and religion.

## Benefits and impacts

This research reveals that in the right hands, community circus is a powerful vehicle for personal and social development. The key benefits it provides are summarised below. Note however that the best illustration of the benefits of community circus are via visual demonstrations<sup>2</sup> or through experiencing it – words can only partly convey what community circus has to offer.

Type of benefit/impact	Key elements
<b>Open to all</b>	'Anyone can circus' - regardless of age, ability and mobility; there is an activity that will appeal to most people
<b>Inclusive and bonding</b>	Circus is non-competitive, non-threatening, builds trust and empathy, can break down barriers and challenge prejudice
<b>Supports personal growth and development</b>	Circus provides a host of benefits for individuals including health and fitness, coordination and motor skills, self-confidence and self-esteem, learning and concentration, communication skills, self-discipline, motivation, sense of achievement, pride and perseverance and provides an outlet for 'safe' risk taking – it's also a lot of fun
<b>Social learning</b>	Through learning circus skills and being part of a performance people build trust and cooperation, leadership and responsibility, willingness to try new things, empathy and supporting others, assessing other peoples level of skill, needs and feelings, teamwork, respect and performance skills
<b>Community building and social change</b>	Community circus can connect families and communities, including parents/carers with children, build a sense of pride and belonging and can change attitudes – for example towards people with disabilities, or by using circus performance as a vehicle for social messages such as anti-bullying, HIV/AIDS prevention and violence prevention

As well as connecting people across divides, circus can support children's development in particular by helping them to learn about themselves; take risks;

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<sup>2</sup> See for example [www.communitycircus.co.nz](http://www.communitycircus.co.nz) or [www.circuskumarani.co.nz](http://www.circuskumarani.co.nz) for you tube clips and videos of community circus in action.

trust; aspire to achieve new things; persevere and have fun. Circus can also hold value in schools to promote all forms of learning and development (including mental, physical, social, emotional and kinaesthetic); provide an alternative to traditional sports and arts; appeal to reluctant exercisers and at risk youth; reduce bullying and antisocial behaviour and provide a vehicle for risk taking.

Given its significant reported potential for positive outcomes, in the literature some authors ask why community circus is not more prevalent. Reasons given include often unconscious associations of circus with human fears such as a fear of heights, of looking silly, of falling, feeling exposed or ridiculed. Other perceived barriers include health and safety concerns, lack of resources and skills to teach circus and the risk element of circus, which is also considered to be a key part of its appeal. Concern is also expressed that attempts to mainstream community circus might undermine the mystery and magic of circus.



Tauranga Breakaway Programme 2010

## Good practice

Good practice for community circus involves:

- Having well trained, skilled, passionate and committed leaders and teachers of community circus
- Appropriate venues for teaching, practicing and performance
- Funding streams and quality equipment and resources
- Good communication of activity and networking among the sector
- Clear policies that are applied relating to health and safety, conduct and practice.

## Evaluation

Evaluation of community circus activity tends to be based on participation levels, self-reported impacts for participants, capturing before and after changes for participants, audience feedback and identifying wider community impacts.

Rigorous independent evaluation of community circus programmes is rare. On the other hand, stories are everywhere in the literature of transformative experiences for individuals, groups and communities through taking part in community circus.

Evaluation of community circus activity tends to be either of specific community circus programmes (and particularly school based programmes), or needs analyses for the sector (and especially the youth circus sector). These evaluations tend to be qualitative (based on people's views and perceptions) and to focus on the experiences of participants of community circus and/or the views of community circus providers and practitioners.

Quantifying the impact of community circus can be a challenge, as it can be hard to gauge before and after effects. Some impacts are long term and it can be difficult to 'prove' that the circus programme was the key factor in any particular effect. The impacts of taking part in community circus can be profound yet may not be consciously registered by the participant for some time, if at all.

Overall, community circus tends to be well suited to story based evaluation techniques, visual methods such as Photovoice<sup>3</sup>, participatory methods and longitudinal studies that can show 'downstream' and longer term impacts.



Wellington Circus Trust performers

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.photovoice.org/>.



## The New Zealand community circus scene

There is a small population of circus artists in New Zealand<sup>4</sup>. At present, within this population community circus involves a handful of charitable organisations, individuals and small groups undertaking activity in pockets of the country. This project identified key areas of community circus activity in Northland (Dargaville, Waipu and Kaikohe, Whangarei), Wellington, Taranaki, Auckland and Christchurch. This activity is generally unconnected and lowly resourced.



Circus has not played a strong part in New Zealand culture historically but signs of a development phase for circus nationally are emerging. These include the first national Golden Carnie Awards celebrating circus excellence in New Zealand in 2013 and the recent formation of the New Zealand Circus Development Cooperative.

Key perceived community circus strengths in New Zealand at present are the quality, passion and commitment of the people involved, its potential, its developing national network, its open and inclusive nature and its grass roots, community focus.

Community circus in New Zealand currently depends on professional circus artists and international volunteers to cater for large events and inspire and mentor circus students. Some of these students will pursue international careers and some can be trained as future circus teachers. Building a connected community of circus students, teachers and performers is a major opportunity nationally.



Other key needs are for funding and resources (paid staff, stable facilities to operate out of, equipment, sponsorship, professional advice, inter/national exchanges), and the formation of national support systems such as a central website, training and mentoring opportunities, networking events, support for

<sup>4</sup> See for example <http://www.stuff.co.nz/dominion-post/culture/performance/8552664/New-heights-for-circus-talent>.



Circus Kumarani celebrate 10 years in Dargaville in 2013

existing groups to strengthen and new groups to establish.

Further needs relate to quality control and assurance – specifically training of community circus tutors, skilled staff, ongoing professional development, standards and good practice and research and evaluation. Greater profile, awareness and understanding of community circus as a sector is sought, including a greater web presence, promotion of existing organisations and community circus and other forms of circus and social arts.

Unique aspects of community circus in New Zealand are the 'do it yourself', creative nature of New Zealand culture, the way overseas travellers often get involved in local community circus provision and the potential of combining circus with Maori and Pacific cultures and art forms in particular.



Christchurch Community Circus Trust



Craig McDermott and Celeste Berdinner from The Wellington Circus Trust Youth Circus troupe. Photo: Mark Faamaoni

## How can community circus flourish in New Zealand?

Two key strategies are proposed to support the development of community circus in New Zealand:

- Support gifted people and existing organisations to excel
- Develop infrastructure to support circus activity from local to national levels

### 1. Support gifted people and existing organisations to excel

From national and international experience, community circus organisations and achievements are driven by one or a few visionary individuals.

Identifying and supporting these gifted people is a key strategy to support community circus in New Zealand. These people are found in the existing community circus organisations and via events such as regional and national circus festivals and local and regional arts and cultural events.

These individuals have a passion for circus but often need support with various tasks to be able to deliver community circus effectively. It often takes outsiders to see what these people need to excel, plus facilitation to connect these people to the resources they need and support the development of sustainable funding sources and the building of social enterprises around these people.

Funding could be sourced for individuals/organisations to support existing community circus providers to obtain the support and advice they need to achieve their aspirations and make a greater difference.



Wellington Circus Trust performer

## 2. Develop infrastructure to support circus activity from local to national levels

As well as assisting current community circus activity to grow and develop, another key opportunity is to build national infrastructure in the following areas, to support circus from local to national levels.

Key area	Opportunities
<p><b>Communications and networking, building relationships and partnerships</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Create a national web presence for community circus in New Zealand, including a calendar of events, repository for useful resources, advice on funding, research and evaluation</li> <li>■ Create a web based guide similar to the WOOFing Guide (Working on Organic Farms) for community circus, which includes who is doing what, where and how they can be contacted</li> <li>■ Coordinate regional and national networking opportunities</li> <li>■ Support connections, partnering, networking and brokering opportunities between the community circus sector and others (eg theatre, music, arts therapy, community arts)</li> <li>■ Seek to build a Pacific wide community circus network and international connections with New Zealand practitioners</li> </ul>
<p><b>Development of teacher training, mentoring and career pathways</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Develop formal and informal circus teaching, training, mentoring and employment opportunities</li> <li>■ Access Australian training opportunities by joining the Australian Circus and Physical Theatre Association</li> <li>■ Develop mentoring programmes, internships and scholarship opportunities to grow the pool of community circus teachers and trainers</li> <li>■ Seek to build a 'home' for community circus training in New Zealand, or build a network of trainers.</li> </ul>

<p><b>Creation of guidance on health and safety, insurance, good practice and conduct</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Much of this already exists, which could be adapted, added to and informed by New Zealand practitioners to suit this context</li> </ul>
<p><b>Facilitate international exchanges, sharing and connections</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Study tours abroad, exchanges between New Zealand and overseas community circus organisations and connecting local and overseas organisations</li> <li>■ Sharing of expertise, resources, mentoring and voluntary internships</li> </ul>
<p><b>Identify funding, partnering and resource opportunities</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Through the web based presence, identify funding streams and opportunities for community circus and connect local circus providers with potential funders</li> <li>■ Work with funders and the philanthropic sector to identify and develop funding sources</li> </ul>
<p><b>Develop community circus as a form of social enterprise</b></p>	<p>Community circus is uniquely suited to social entrepreneurship, given its wide range of activities and funding sources, including self-generated revenue streams through classes, workshops, events, performances, team building and so on.</p> <p>Key opportunities for developing community circus programmes exist with the following sectors (for example):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Early childhood education</li> <li>■ Out of school care and holiday programmes</li> <li>■ Retirement villages</li> <li>■ Disability sector</li> <li>■ Refugee and migrant groups</li> <li>■ People with mental health issues</li> </ul>
<p><b>Bring circus into schools and early childhood centres</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ A key opportunity is to bring circus to the early childhood sector and schools (using the Enviroschools model or similar). This would require strong advocates and the ability to meet increased demand (i.e. a larger pool of trained circus teachers).</li> </ul>

The possibility of a national centre for community circus was also raised via this research. This could be linked to the creation of new tertiary training opportunities (or the reinstatement of Christchurch Polytechnic Institute's 'Circo Arts' Diploma<sup>5</sup>), or be explored with existing organisations.



**New Zealand Clown Doctors in action – there is now an International Institute for Medical Clowning and our clown doctors are trained in the art of medical clowning. Patrick Bellett Photography.**

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<sup>5</sup> This Diploma in circus arts was suspended after the 2011 Christchurch earthquake, with a decision yet to be made on whether it will be re-established. Note that Wellington Circus Trust is currently seeking to develop an accredited circus training course.

# Conclusion

*"We're all in different boats, but we need to raise the level of the lake"  
(Matt Hall, Former International Juggling Association Champion, United States, at the Auckland Circus Convention, February 2012).*

Community circus is not for everyone but engages significant numbers of people worldwide. It offers a healthy alternative to traditional sport, art and recreational pursuits in New Zealand, can engage reluctant exercisers and hold special appeal for the young and the marginalised.

As diverse and colourful as the circus world is, so are the opportunities to grow it in New Zealand. An individual or existing group could seek funding to action the ideas in this research, or existing community circus groups could form a network and seek funding for a coordinator, or a national association with a membership could be developed. As noted above, a national circus centre could be pursued (which could be online or in a physical place), which is independent but promotes and supports local circus groups.

Other options range from New Zealand groups joining the Australian Circus and Physical Theatre Association and/or the Asian Pacific Social Circus Network in the short term, to seeking to build a Pacific wide circus network.

Having a national circus hui or conference to discuss as a sector how best to proceed is the ideal next step. The Wellington Circus Trust is seeking to host a national circus conference later in 2013, depending on attaining funding – this could be a vehicle for the sector to discuss the issues raised.

Given a constrained funding environment in New Zealand, focusing on strengths, building good relationships and collaboration is required to support community circus to grow.



**Tauranga Breakaway Programme 2010**