

ISTD AGM 2026 Candidate and Trustee biographies

Candidates standing for election as Trustee:

Ben Darmanin

Ben Darmanin is a theatre producer, entrepreneur and strategic consultant with over 25 years' experience across the West End, Broadway and the international performing arts industry.

Originally from Malta, Ben divides his time between the UK and New York. His professional credits span major productions and projects including Les Misérables, Miss Saigon, The Phantom of the Opera, Mary Poppins, Barnum, Wicked, Cats, Hamilton, Dirty Dancing, The Met Gala, Only Gold and Nine. He spent four years working closely with theatre impresario Sir Cameron Mackintosh before working as an Associate Producer to award-winning director and choreographer Andy Blankenbuehler.

Ben is CEO and Artistic Director of MPAA, a musical theatre conservatoire offering degree-level training alongside ISTD teacher training, including DDE and Associate Street Dance pathways. He graduated with an MA in Musical Theatre from the Royal Academy of Music and was awarded ARAM in recognition of his contribution to the musical theatre industry. He is also a Trustee of Herts Inclusive Theatre.

Ben's connection with the ISTD began as a young performer studying vocational examinations in the UK. He later worked as an invigilator at ISTD 2, gaining a deep appreciation for the Society's international community and the progression its qualifications provide. In 2024, he was invited to speak at the ISTD Graduation Ceremony at the Royal Geographical Society, celebrating the achievements of newly qualified dance teachers.

Ben remains committed to supporting the next generation of performers, teachers and creative practitioners through industry led decision making.

Judith Patrickson

Judith is a qualified accountant and spent over 25 years working in the performing arts in England and Scotland.

Judith qualified as a Chartered Accountant in 1982 and in the early 1990's began specialising in the Charities and Not for Profit sector. In 2001 moved to Scotland as Finance Manager then Finance Director of Scottish Opera until retiring in 2022. During that time Judith was part of the creation of the National Performing Companies – 5 Scottish Performing Arts organisations - and oversaw the move from funding from Scottish Arts Council (now Creative Scotland) to funding directly from Scottish Government. She was also the representative for Scotland in the negotiations around the creation of Theatre Tax Credit and then Orchestra Tax Credit.

Judith is currently Senior Director of Finance at Birmingham Royal Ballet.

Over the years, Judith earned a Fellowship in ICAEW, a Diploma in Charity Accounting and is a Business Finance Professional. She is also experienced in Board Governance. With this experience, Judith has held and is holding voluntary roles in the arts and education. She is currently a Director of Cheek by Jowl Theatre Company, Chair of Finance Committee

of Citizens Theatre, Governor of East Durham College, and Director of Capella Nova. Judith was a Director of Vanishing Point Theatre Company, Cove Park and Director of Charles Rennie Mackintosh Society.

Trustees standing for re-election:

Mary Cooke

Mary Has been involved with the ISTD for many years. Starting with her own early training where love of the work of many genres began. This was then incorporated into her teaching career and her role as examiner for the ICB faculty.

Her teaching career began after gaining her LRAD in London. Her first teaching role was at the renowned Bush Davies School. Time here taught her the value of the exchange of knowledge, how this is passed on and how that then builds the young teacher's teaching skills toolbox. Further development continued as Principal of a large private school in Sussex. New experiences were added to the list when initiating and creating start-up schools, when family job relocations demanded, and the many difficulties experienced were noted.

She also discovered a very rewarding role supporting teachers in her area, including organising several "Day of Dance" events. Mary's goal was to build relationships, so that the teachers feel supported and not isolated, just as she had experienced in her young teaching days.

From 2017 Mary has been a Mentor on the DDP for unit 2 and been delighted to witness the development of teaching skills and confidence in the mentees.

As an Imperial Ballet examiner for many years, she has witnessed a raft of changes. This gives a unique insight into the delivery of exams on the ground.

With this kaleidoscope of knowledge Mary has been able to contribute at council meetings with her understanding of the many stakeholders. She has been a board member since November 2023.

She is committed to supporting the ISTD to take forward a strong, vibrant Society offering dance for the future for all.

As a supporter and participant in creative dance projects in her local area she understands the power of dance and the joy that it can bring.

Christina Fotinaki

Christina Fotinaki is an award winning choreographer, FISTD and Examiner in Modern Theatre, Imperial Ballet and Contemporary Dance, in addition to her roles as a Tutor and Assessor for DDE.

Christina is a member of the ISTD Imperial Ballet and Modern Theatre teaching teams, delivering lectures and CPD courses Internationally.

Enrolled as a full-time student, Christina pursued her studies at the Maya Sofou Professional School of Dance and successfully completed her graduation in 1992. Christina extended her educational pursuits globally by participating in courses across Bern, Zurich, Vienna, New York, and Los Angeles. Her studies encompassed disciplines such as Graham, Cunningham,

Hawkins, Limón, and Release techniques, with a particular focus on choreography, improvisation, musical jazz, commercial jazz, hip-hop, and contemporary jazz from 1993 to 2007.

Following her graduation, Christina embarked on her teaching journey, instructing diverse groups and levels of students, ranging from foundational to Advanced 2, DDE, Licentiate, and Fellowship levels in both Modern Theatre and Imperial Ballet.

As a co-founder and Director of Dance Texture, Christina spearheads a comprehensive, full-time professional training program designed for both dancers and dance teachers. This initiative is established in Athens, Greece.

Christina's achievements as a choreographer within the performing industry are equally remarkable. In 2000, she took on the role of assistant choreographer for "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream coat" directed and choreographed by Toni award winner Gillian Gregory. Additionally, she served as an assistant choreographer in 2003 for "Victor-Victoria," also directed by Gillian Gregory, and in the same year, contributed as an assistant choreographer to "Musical Nights," directed by Derrick Lassala.

From 2003 until the present day, Christina has been involved in choreographing as well as being a part of the production teams in major musical productions, theatre performances, dance group showcases, video clips, television programs, TV series, film, music stage productions, and music awards ceremonies in Athens.

In 2018 Christina was awarded the Imperial International Theatre Award.

Tom Hobden

Tom Hobden is a multi-hyphenate artist working across film, digital, movement and participation, with over 25 years' experience across the UK's leading arts organisations, including New Adventures, the Royal Opera House, Sadler's Wells, Alexandra Palace and Dance East.

He founded Tom Hobden Studio in 2024, an independent Suffolk-based studio producing film, digital and community arts projects, most recently One Seat Cinema, an immersive digital installation delivered in partnership with Suffolk Libraries.

Tom co-founded the community dance organisation We Are Unit C.I.C. in 2014 and curates New Adventures' Overture programme, a national CPD initiative for early-career community artists.

A Clore Short Course graduate, Tom has held associate artist roles at Theatre Royal Bury St Edmunds and Dance East, alongside fellowships with Studio Wayne McGregor and Real Ideas, and his practice spans both cultural and commercial sectors.

Trustees in office:

Michael Elliott

Michael Elliott was a Trustee of the Birmingham Royal Ballet for nine years and is a member of the Governing Body of Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance. He is also a Trustee of the David Ross Education Trust, a company member of the Greenheart Learning Partnership, and a director of the Denville Hall Development Company Ltd.

During his career, he has served as the Chief Executive of both the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic and the Royal Scottish National Orchestra; as Director, Culture in the senior

civil service of the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS); and, until his retirement, as Chief Executive of the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM), the world's leading music exam board at the end of 2020. In 2022 he acted as Interim Chief Executive of the Arts Council of Wales and in 2024 was Interim Director of the National Portrait Gallery.

His earlier career spanned policy development in Europe, higher education, arts funding, and tourism, and he was appointed to his first Chief Executive role in 1989.

Michael has held voluntary roles in the arts and education sectors, including serving as a governor of schools and colleges in Sheffield and the West Midlands; as Chair of the Belgrade Theatre Coventry and Deputy Chair of the Sheffield Crucible Theatre; and as Chair of the Governing Body of the University of Wolverhampton. He has been awarded Honorary Doctorates by Sheffield Hallam University and the University of Wolverhampton.

He has acted as an advisor to both the DCMS and the Department for Education on key developments, including the Model Music Curriculum, and has chaired national groupings of regional agency Chief Officers in arts funding and tourism at key moments of government driven sectoral change. He also served as Associate Cultural Director for Liverpool 08.

Lynn Chandler

Lynn Chandler has spent nearly all her professional life in the education sector and enjoys bringing financial discipline and process to companies as they grow and scale.

Lynn graduated from Essex University in Economics in 1982 and qualified as a Chartered Accountant with Ernst & Young in 1985. She joined BPP Holdings plc, a professional education group which had just floated on the Stock Exchange, as Group Financial Controller in 1988; was promoted to Group Finance Director in 1995 and retired from full-time employment in 2005. Whilst at BPP, the group grew from a UK business with £6M turnover and 125 staff to an international group with turnover of over £130m employing 1,600 staff across 40 offices throughout Europe.

Since 2005 Lynn has worked part-time. In 2007 she was co-founder of a government sponsored vocational training business which was sold in 2014 to an AIM listed company. From 2014 to her start-up retirement in 2026, Lynn was Chief Financial Officer and Company Secretary of Virtual Class – an edtech business.

Lynn is currently a trustee of the Dance Professionals Fund (Royal Ballet Benevolent Fund) and previously served as a non-executive committee member of A2Dominion Housing Group (a registered social housing group with over 34,000 homes under management and an asset base of over £2bn) and as a non-executive director of an NHS Hospital Trust.

Lynn believes the Society is well placed to achieve its aspiration of being a world leader in dance education. She considers it to be an exciting and interesting time to be a Trustee of the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing and to be part of ensuring it succeeds in securing its future by expanding the Society's influence and status as a high quality, multi-genre dance examination board world-wide.

Juliet Diener

Juliet Diener is Founder and CEO of icandance, a Dance Movement Psychotherapist, clinical supervisor, Inclusive dance specialist, trained Cecchetti ballet teacher and a qualified specialist educator.

Juliet's love for dance began in her early childhood as she trained in the Cecchetti Ballet method within the ISTD in South Africa. Having moved to London in 1999 she worked as a ballet teacher in various dance schools and has remained a member of the ISTD throughout. Alongside her love for dance Juliet has worked in education for over 25 years in both mainstream, special and Higher education teaching and lecturing, including leadership and consultancy roles. Exploring the interface between wellbeing, creativity and learning, Juliet completed a master's degree in Dance Movement Psychotherapy working further in Mental Health settings.

Bringing together her expertise in education, dance, and psychotherapeutic approaches, Juliet founded the charity icandance in 2006. icandance is a creative, therapeutic community which connects emotion and lived experience to creative expression and performance by helping disabled young people share their stories through dance. Juliet integrates her expertise to create, lead and research inclusive communities. She supervises, lectures, and leads trainings combining her various areas of expertise and runs a private clinical practice in North London. Juliet continues to research and publish focusing on areas of creativity, embodied practice, dance, and inclusion.

Juliet is a registered member of the UKCP and ADMPUK.

Leanne Kirkham

Leanne is originally from Blackpool where her dancing life began under the guidance of ISTD Fellows Ruth and Joan Langley, she then went on to train at Performers College, completing ISTD Associate qualifications. Upon graduating, Leanne performed in various productions including the UK Tour of 42nd Street, before returning to her hometown.

Leanne spent 10 years teaching at various dance schools, and whilst developing her teaching practice, was keen to ensure that dance was accessible to everyone. She undertook training in inclusive theatre with Chickenshed, which enabled her to broaden her knowledge, skills and confidence in teaching students of all abilities. Leanne then worked alongside teaching artists from The Royal Ballet School as part of the Primary Steps programme in her role as Joint Director of Dance at Bispham High School Arts College.

In 2010, Leanne undertook her BA (Hons) in Community Dance Practice, graduating in 2011 with First Class Honours. She then worked as Dance Education Officer at Northern Ballet in Leeds, before taking up the role of Director of Learning in 2016, and is now Director of Academy Operations and Learning. As part of the Senior Leadership Team, Leanne is Designated Safeguarding Lead, and has responsibility for the Academy of Northern Ballet, and the Learning and Outreach programme. Her team have developed an in-school programme to support children to develop their physical and emotional wellbeing through dance, and recently launched a similar pilot programme for SEND schools. Leanne is a proud advocate of inclusive dance, ensuring the programmes at Northern Ballet are accessible to all. Alongside her team, she recently worked with inclusive companies in Madrid and Rotterdam to develop new pedagogy in inclusive dance, with a focus on hyper-mobility and safe practice.

Peter Meager

Pete is a qualified Dancesport teacher, trained under the guidance and support of the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing. He has also been a recognised competition adjudicator by the British Dance Council. Since 2025, he has also held the position of Chair of the ISTD Academy.

When Pete is not teaching, he works as a professional Master of Ceremonies for both national and international dance competitions. With his vast amount of experience with the 'equality dance' scene, Pete is often at the helm of large Championships such as the IFSSDA World Championships which were last held in Valencia in 2026 as part of the 12. Gay Games and the Holiday Dance Classic in Las Vegas.

He also regularly supports the European Championships and has been an active board member of the United Kingdom Equality Dance Council (UKEDC), European Same-Sex Dance Association (ESSDA), and the Federation of Gay Games (FGG). Pete also organises two equality dance competitions here in the UK: the 'UK Equality Open' and the 'Equality Fun Competition' – both bringing inclusive dancers all onto one floor.

He brings to the board a wealth of experience as a Sales & Retention Director for Compass Group UK & Ireland and supports the ISTD in driving the organisation forward – focusing specifically on diversity, sustainable growth, and enhanced stakeholder relationships.

Elizabeth Nyman

Elizabeth is a Director of Strategy & Planning for Informa, a FSTE 100 B2B events and publishing group. After graduating in Law, she began her career in consulting, working for Deloitte, PwC, and The Berkeley Partnership. Here, she built extensive experience in strategy and transformation consulting, with a focus on helping large, complex organisations to set direction and structure effective teams.

Elizabeth's consulting work primarily spanned the media and advertising, finance and CPG sectors, with a particularly memorable year spent working with Michael Elliott to define the digital-led business strategy of the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM) in 2015. She has a lifelong love of music and the Arts and has played the piano for as long as she can remember.

Frederick Way

Frederick Way is a UK Mediator working across civil, commercial and employment disputes both for his own company Frederick Way Mediation and for CEDR (the Centre for Effective Dispute Resolution). Ranked in Legal 500 as a leading UK mediator, in December 2024, Frederick was named Civil/Commercial Mediator of the Year at the National Mediation Awards, the highest award in UK Mediation.

Prior to becoming a mediator, Frederick trained as a barrister and worked in property and professional negligence disputes. From 2012 to 2025, Frederick worked for Europe's largest provider of Mediation Services, CEDR as a civil, commercial and employment mediator, trainer and Senior Dispute Resolution Consultant working across legal industries to develop alternative dispute resolution systems. Prior to that role, Frederick was the Head of the CEDR Foundation, responsible for all of CEDR's charitable output and innovation.

Having set up his own practice Frederick Way Mediation in 2025, Frederick continues to work with CEDR as a Leading Panel Mediator and also works as a Lead Trainer in Mediation for CEDR, as well as being a coach and assessor of mediator candidates. Frederick was the Coach of the English and Welsh National student negotiation teams between 2018-2023 for the International Championships. As well as being Vice Chair of the ISTD, Frederick was previously Deputy Chair of Access All Areas, a theatre charity for Learning Disabled and Neurodiverse performers from 2015-2023.