

Task and Finish Group on Participation in the Arts

Response from Voluntary Arts Wales

1. Which groups of people participate in your organisation's arts activities?

Voluntary Arts Wales represents around 4,000 amateur arts and crafts groups across Wales. This includes choirs, orchestras, brass bands, amateur theatre groups, folk dancers, lace makers, quilters and painters. Amateur arts groups are local voluntary organisations, governed by their participants. Most do not receive any public funding and are (almost) self-sufficient, covering their costs through the subscriptions paid by their members and the income from ticket sales for their performances or exhibitions. The members of amateur arts groups are volunteers from every walk of life. While many amateur arts groups may employ professional artists (as conductors or tutors) the groups are established and run by local volunteers. Voluntary Arts Wales represents the full range of arts and crafts. We work in partnership with umbrella bodies representing particular artforms, including both Wales-specific umbrella bodies (such as the Drama Association of Wales and Ty Cerdd) and UK-wide umbrella bodies with members in Wales (including Making Music and the National Operatic and Dramatic Association). Most arts participation happens in amateur arts groups: we estimate that approximately 650,000 people regularly participate in amateur arts groups in Wales.

2. a) Do you think that budget changes have affected participation in the arts, either positively or negatively?

In March 2011 Voluntary Arts Wales conducted a national survey on the effects of changes in funding and the financial climate on local, grassroots, voluntary arts activity across Wales. Based on the responses to the survey, the voluntary arts seemed to be fairly healthy. Participation seemed to be on the increase: some organisations had seen slight or no changes; others had seen significant increases e.g. a growth in interest in traditional music – “it seems to be appealing to people when times are stressful”.

Although most local voluntary arts groups receive little or no public funding, reductions in funding to the bodies that support and advise them, and to the venues and facilities they use, will clearly have an effect on their activities.

On 18 March 2011 Voluntary Arts Wales convened a meeting called ‘Charting a course for the voluntary arts’ at Theatr Powys Drama Centre in Llandrindod Wells to discuss whether voluntary arts activity was flourishing or in decline. Some of the comments made at this meeting included:

- In Caerphilly, community choirs appeared to be experiencing an increase in numbers, appealing more to young people because of its emphasis on ‘community’ and not ‘traditional’ male voice choirs.

- Some grassroots groups and activities were oblivious to funding cuts but there was concern that the impact would be felt at a later date.
- Some organisations/groups were entirely independent and did not access public funding e.g. Theatr Maldwyn, Powys.
- There are hidden costs/problems for voluntary/amateur activity e.g. affordable or free space; fuel costs in rural areas' increasing venue hire costs.
- Emphasis on activities/groups as 'big family' and participation in the arts is very important in these times. It brings people together e.g. Theatr Powys community productions were expensive to provide, were held in different locations, and were free at the point of delivery. Charging schools to participate in theatre in education could exclude some children, as some schools could afford to pay, others couldn't. If the service wasn't free, it should be as accessible as possible. There is evidence that increasing numbers of people are volunteering. If they had to pay to engage in arts activity, this could make it exclusive. There is a need to look at how it can be made available in these times. Need to look at how everyone can access the arts – it opens a door, like education.
- Some arts activities need to be subsidised to make them accessible e.g. CARAD subsidises creative writing workshops, otherwise they would not be affordable for people. Marches Poets, a very young collective of sixty people, organises poetry readings and needs to pay for poets and a venue. They do this under the 'protective banner' of Mid Wales and Border Arts. How long can this last? Being self-sufficient is important – sometimes a small amount of seed money can help.
- Communities are very good at supporting groups within them. The voluntary arts sector is resilient; creativity at grassroots level will survive and happen without us. But, for some it will mean that they will not be able to access or do what they want to do. It may not be as straightforward e.g. not as affordable, impact on venues, ambitions will be lowered. We could be our own worst enemy – Government withdraws funding, we go on doing it. This hides the complexity of the situation e.g. number of events, paying artists etc.
- There is a place for publicly funded, not for profit organisations in the community. Some activities e.g. poetry readings are priceless to individual and may be of more benefit than mass culture, and we need to get this across to funders.
- Too many terms and conditions attached to public funding can stifle the work and force groups to go in a different direction. It is getting harder to access money and there are more hoops to jump through.
- There were concerns about increasing demands of compliance for amateur arts groups (funding, health and safety etc)

b) Do you think that certain groups of people have been affected more than others?

The voluntary/amateur arts sector is so big (encompassing approximately 4,000 local groups involving around 650,000 people across Wales) that it is dangerous to generalise. Within our sector there is huge diversity and almost sections of the population are involved in amateur arts activity. Within any one particular amateur arts group, however, it is true that there is probably room for improvement in terms of inclusion and access. The nature of amateur arts groups, which tend to be formed by friends coming together because they want to sing or dance or act, makes them likely to

create (completely accidentally and unintentionally) barriers to access to people who aren't like them. Although the amateur arts sector is largely self-sufficient, resilient and sustainable, one key aspect in which it does need support is in helping groups to become more inclusive and diverse – both to ensure that there are opportunities to participate for all sections of society and to help groups find new members and audiences to help them survive and thrive. Cuts in funding to umbrella bodies and networks in the amateur arts in Wales threaten this kind of support and make it harder to ensure that those parts of the population who tend to be under-represented in arts participation are able to join amateur arts groups.

Also, the presence of a self-organised local amateur arts group is, to some extent, an indicator of a relatively healthy community (or section of the community). Reductions in funding to professional participatory arts initiatives (community arts) is likely to affect the numbers of people from more disadvantaged communities participating in the arts for the first time. As a crude generalisation, people get involved in arts participation in three ways:

- through the voluntary/amateur arts – by setting up or joining a local amateur group, attending an evening class, or being self-taught;
- through a professionally-led community arts project or initiative;
- through an outreach programme run by a professional arts institution.

While the voluntary/amateur route is fairly self-sufficient and sustainable, regardless of public funding, people without strong early life experience of the arts and people from less cohesive or affluent communities are more likely to need the professional support and encouragement provided by the other two routes in order to start participating in the arts. So cuts in funding to professional community artists and outreach programmes may not make a significant change to the overall statistics for arts participation across Wales but are likely to reduce the number of people from more disadvantaged backgrounds participating.

Traditionally there has been a disappointingly poor level of connection between the three routes into arts participation. Intuitively it would make sense for people who have been attracted to start participating in the arts through a professionally-led community arts project or outreach programme to then be helped to find a local amateur group to join to ensure that they continue their arts participation in a long-term, sustainable way. In practice this has often been difficult to achieve. This might be because the people involved in each of these three routes have very different motivations and values: amateur artists are usually motivated by a passion for their artform, whereas professional community artists are often focussed on using the arts to develop a community or address other social goals. Bringing these different worlds together in order to encourage long-term sustainable arts participation that is truly diverse and inclusive is a key priority for Voluntary Arts Wales but reductions in our own public funding have made it much more difficult to pursue this goal.

Another major issue in relation to arts participation is transport. For those who have to travel to participate, for example in rural areas with longer distances to travel, the rising cost of fuel is a significant factor and many people are dependent on public transport services that face cuts. 'Arts and Public Engagement: Patterns, processes and levers for change' (published by the Arts Council of Wales and the Welsh Assembly Government in 2008) concluded that: *"In both rural and urban areas*

the lack of public transport, especially during the evening is a critical barrier to both attendance and participation in arts activities.”

3. Are there gaps in provision for people to participate in arts activities, either demographically or geographically?

It is difficult to give a definitive answer to this question as there is no comprehensive national survey or database of arts participation. Voluntary Arts Wales has been campaigning for some years for a national audit or mapping of the voluntary arts sector in Wales. In England in 2008 the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and Arts Council England commissioned the first national study of the amateur arts in England ('Our Creative Talent', DCMS 2008). We feel that a similar national survey is needed in Wales. In February 2011 the Welsh Assembly Government Communities and Culture Committee published a report following an enquiry into 'The Accessibility of Arts and Cultural Activities in Wales'. The report makes 16 recommendations to the Welsh Government, including: *"7. To work with partners to enable the identification of geographic areas in Wales where people have particularly limited access to arts and cultural experiences. Following this work, to encourage partners to strategically utilise such information to develop increased access to arts and cultural activities in areas where people have particularly limited access to arts and cultural activities."* Voluntary Arts Wales is keen to see this recommendation implemented and would be delighted to support such work.

Without the detailed information that such a survey would provide, we can say fairly confidently that amateur arts groups exist in almost every geographic area but that their membership does not always fully reflect the wider community in which they are located (see Q 2b, above). Typically those parts of the population that tend to be under-represented in arts participation include the lower socio-economic classes, black and minority ethnic people and disabled people.

It is, however, important to consider our definition of 'arts activities'. 'Arts and Public Engagement: Patterns, processes and levers for change' (published by the Arts Council of Wales and the Welsh Assembly Government in 2008) written by a research team led by Professor Dave Adamson and Professor Hamish Fyfe of the University of Glamorgan explored the reasons for lower levels of arts participation in key social groups, including those living in areas characterised by deprivation. The research identified a *"two tier' definition of the arts in which respondents initially identify a very formal definition of what they term the 'proper arts'. However, on further exploration they provide a wider definition associated with acts of creativity which includes a broader spectrum of activities they associate with as art in practice."* One of the ten actionable findings in this report was the recommendation *"That ACW strengthens its relationship with umbrella organisations and develops a network of relationships between community artists, VAW, WCVA and the county based Arts Development Officers."*

4. Are there enough funding sources available other than the Arts Council for Wales? Are alternative funding sources accessible?

Clearly the current financial climate is one of austerity and funding is in short supply across the board. Nevertheless there is still funding available to support arts participation in Wales. It is all too common for arts organisations not to see beyond the Arts Council of Wales but arts participation contributes to a wide range of agendas and interests a wide range of funders. Over recent years,

across the UK, Voluntary Arts and the amateur arts groups we represent have secured funding related to adult learning, volunteering, health and wellbeing, creative industries, community cohesion and more. There are two significant barriers to such 'alternative' funding sources:

- a requirement for substantial partnership funding to be found in cash: this is an ongoing problem for small amateur arts groups as for them the amount of in-kind support will be proportionately higher than the amount in a major company. There are many items (e.g. use of venue, printing costs, advertising, volunteer time etc.) that can be provided as support in-kind and these often make up to 30 to 40 per cent of total project costs. Even seemingly spontaneous events such as 'flashmobs' cost significant amounts to stage, and limits to how much of the partnership funding can be in-kind can prevent projects happening.
- amateur arts groups not seeing themselves as 'voluntary' or 'community' organisations: most amateur arts groups think of themselves as arts organisations and many do not realise they are eligible to apply for a wide range of funding sources aimed at the voluntary and community sector. Voluntary Arts Wales provides information and advice on such funding but reductions in our own funding and in that of several of the main voluntary arts umbrella bodies in Wales have reduced our capacity to help groups access alternative funding sources.

5. What role does the voluntary arts sector play in promoting participation in the arts in Wales and how can this be supported?

Most arts participation happens in local amateur arts groups. People engage with the voluntary arts on a local level and are more likely to participate here. Many of the best professional artists began as amateurs. The voluntary arts sector provides a massive number of long-term, resilient and sustainable opportunities to participate in the arts which will survive any recession. As we have explained above, however, amateur arts groups are not always as inclusive as they could be and people from some sections of the population, particularly those from more disadvantaged areas, tend to find it more difficult to get involved in the amateur arts. Fortunately the voluntary arts sector has always created its own strong, organic network of infrastructure organisations, from grassroots upwards, which provides the ideal way to support and build capacity in the sector. Voluntary Arts Wales and the network of national umbrella bodies we work with are the trusted and respected voices of a huge sector across Wales and have a strong track record of helping local groups to develop, improve and expand arts participation.

In June 2010 the Arts Council of Wales announced initial funding decisions following a detailed investment review carried out between 2009 and 2010. ACW announced the portfolio of 71 revenue funded organisations (RFOs) that would be prioritised for support from April 2011 onwards, and named 32 organisations that would no longer receive revenue funding. ACW made bold decisions, concentrating funding on fewer organisations rather than making cuts across the board. They took a strategic decision to concentrate funds on 'front line' delivery (those whose core activity is the direct creation, presentation or exhibition of the arts) rather than the activities of agency, umbrella and service organisations. Four voluntary sector umbrella bodies – including Voluntary Arts Wales – were amongst the 32 organisations to lose their revenue funding.

We believe that the ACW review process was clear, open and transparent but we are concerned about the decision to concentrate on 'front line' delivery and to withdraw funding from voluntary

arts infrastructure organisations. Whilst ACW was absolutely within its rights to make the strategic decisions it did, we believe that the decision to withdraw support from so many voluntary arts infrastructure bodies was somewhat short-sighted. There are a huge number of small voluntary groups providing local access to arts experiences that do not access ACW funding directly but benefit indirectly from the funding previously given to infrastructure bodies. They need support, and it is the infrastructure bodies that are best placed to provide that support.

The Welsh Assembly Government Communities and Culture Committee report ('The Accessibility of Arts and Cultural Activities in Wales', February 2011) noted that VAW and others had warned it that the ACW Investment Review had created structural gaps with the discontinuation of funding for a range of umbrella bodies and the Committee formally recognised "*the important function provided by umbrella bodies in providing infrastructure for the arts sector*".

6. Is the strategic relationship between the Welsh Government and the bodies that distribute arts funding effective in increasing participation?

We believe strongly in the 'arm's length' principle, with the Arts Council of Wales making decisions about arts funding independently from the Welsh Government. In relationship to arts participation, however, it is important to realise that the vast majority of arts participation in Wales is not a result of ACW funding. To really effect a step change in overall levels of arts participation we feel there is a need to work more collaboratively, involving the voluntary arts sector, professional community arts sector, professional arts organisations, local authorities and the wider voluntary and community sector. In England, Arts Council England has recently launched an ambitious new national programme to increase arts engagement in some of the parts of the country that currently have the lowest levels of arts engagement ('Creative People and Places', launched 30 January 2012). This programme is developing local consortia involving professional arts organisations, amateur arts organisations, local authorities and community groups. We believe that a similar collaborative approach is necessary in Wales in order to make any significant impact to overall levels of arts participation. To seriously tackle the challenge of increasing participation it is vital for the Arts Council of Wales to find ways of working with those parts of the arts sector that it does not directly fund – particularly local amateur arts groups.

7. All public bodies in Wales will have published a strategic equality plan by April 2012. Do you think that these new public sector equality duties will help to increase participation in the arts among under-represented groups in Wales?

We believe that these strategic equality plans may help but will not be enough on their own to increase participation in the arts among under-represented groups in Wales. As explained above we believe this will require:

- some mapping or audit of existing arts participation;
- greater links between the amateur arts, professional community arts and professional arts organisations;
- increased support for Voluntary Arts Wales and the national voluntary arts umbrella bodies in order to improve inclusivity and diversity within local amateur arts groups;

- more holistic collaboration between amateur and professional arts, local authorities and the wider voluntary and community sector.
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