



Arts 07

Task and Finish Group on Participation in the Arts

Response from the Mid Wales Circuit and Cytser (Meirionydd)

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

The Circuit is a consortium of professionally run and managed theatres and arts centres across the three rural Welsh counties of Gwynedd, Ceredigion and Powys. We have worked together for more than 25 years to share skills and resources, operate joint projects and carry out shared advocacy work. The Circuit employs one part-time staff member, working at home four days per week during term times, and also runs and operates Cytser (see below).

Our theatres, Theatr Mwldan (Cardigan), Theatr Felinfach (Ystrad Aeron), Aberystwyth Arts Centre, Theatr Brycheiniog, Hafren (Newtown) The Wyeside in Builth, Ystradgynlais Miner's Welfare, make up the presenting network for Mid Wales and the prime opportunity for our communities to see professional work on a major stage and for our children and young people to have their first experiences of high quality work close to home. Our programmes necessarily reflect the communities and contexts in which we operate and we aim to offer something for everyone. We also work hard on presenting shows which we know will not break even on ticket receipts but which we believe are important in providing access to the arts for the people of

rural Wales including contemporary dance, Welsh language theatre, new writing for the stage and modern ballet.

However, while the evenings and weekends are generally taken up by professional work, each of the buildings supports its own ecology of art activities which are central to the make up of participatory arts. As theatres we provide a space for children's ballet classes, youth theatre rehearsals, adults art classes, professionally led community arts activities, we host the BTEC performing arts course for Powys and many exhibitions of local art and photography groups.

Each of the venues also has its own relationship with a network of amateur theatre companies, choirs, musical theatre groups and youth theatres. We work alongside these to provide the technical, marketing and organisational support they need to bring their work to our stages and their performances provide a key part of our programming. For example, Cwmni Theatr Maldwyn, a Welsh language youth based musical theatre company, work with and rehearse at Hafren in Newtown. Their marketing work is supported by the theatre and their shows go on to tour the network of Circuit venues and throughout Wales, drawing in some of the largest audiences for any Welsh language theatre production in the country.

In addition, since April 2011 the Circuit has been providing governance and management to Cytser: The Constellation Project in Meirionydd. Cytser grew out of the outreach work of Theatr Harlech, and was designed with the help of the Circuit to provide a fresh approach to delivering the arts in Southern Snowdonia. The project employs a full-time Artistic Director, Ian Mackenzie-Thurley, and is funded through a partnership between ACW Lottery and Gwynedd County Council. Its aim is to provide a mixed programme of professionally led community arts work as well as high quality professional presentations to the sparse rural populations of Meirionydd. The Circuit's Coordinator acts as General Manager to Cytser and the marketing support is provided on a one day per week basis by Hafren's Marketing Officer.

While Cytser is a small and relatively new project, its work is already having a large impact on scattered communities and from the Circuit theatres' perspective it provides a living example of how we can work as venues towards a more "constellated" approach to arts in rural

communities, experimenting with “flicks in the sticks” type film showing models, new approaches to running large school based projects and a fresh idea of what a stage might be – for example we have run and are planning events at Portmeirion, Barmouth seafront, Plas T Y Bwlch and Llechwedd slate mines.

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

The repercussions of the ACW Investment Review have had a major impact on the Circuit’s venues, two of which, Theatr Harlech and the Wyeside in Builth, had their funding withdrawn as a result of the review. The Circuit has worked hard as a network to support both venues, taking on the running of Cytser to allow Harlech’s board to focus on managing the future of the theatre building and working with Theatr Brycheiniog and The Wyeside on a “Federation model” which will allow theatre provision to continue in Builth Wells.

In terms of Cytser’s work the core operating budgets of the project are small and mean we are reliant on attracting additional funds for delivering some project work. Like many community arts organisation we have worked hard on developing partnerships with Communities First bodies, Gwynedd Youth Service, Gwynedd Domestic Abuse Service and others. Much of our work is instrumentally driven, which perfectly suits Cytser’s own agenda to provide access to the arts for those least likely to become involved in other ways.

Both the Circuit theatres and Cytser are concerned that the uncertainty around Communities First means officers and local partnerships feel unable to plan work ahead and to engage arts groups as delivery partners. The cuts to county council provision in other areas will also have an impact in terms of agencies using their budget to buy in arts provision, as the Youth Service and Domestic Abuse Service have been able to do.

Another major issue for both our rural theatres and Cytser is the cost of transport for schools to bring children to participate in shows. For example, three of our theatres have been involved in productions of Noyes Fludde with Mid Wales Opera. The show offers primary age children the chance to join in a professionally directed production integrating local choirs, childrens’ ballet and dance schools into a full

scale theatre piece. However, some schools have felt unable to take up the opportunity because of the cost of buses and my own childrens' school can only take part in the production at Hafren (8 miles away) because the Friends of School are subsidising transport.

In the case of Cytser, we are involved in a huge theatrical production by high school aged children at Harlech Castle in July as part of Cauldrons and Furnaces. More than 350 children from across Gwynedd have worked with professional musicians, choreographers, musical directors and stage managers to create the show which traces the history of the castle through music, dance and song. While teachers acknowledge this is an incredible opportunity for their pupils, we have had to work separately with each of the schools in their own buildings rather than bringing students to the castle as the schools could not afford even subsidised transport costs, or the staffing ratios required to take children out of a school setting other than on the days of the show itself. Some of the children involved had never visited Harlech Castle and yet all of them live within 30 miles of it.

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

The non-statutory nature of arts provision within local authorities means we need to be constantly aware of our role as advocates for the whole of the arts in our communities and to councillors, and our role in supporting the sector's wider ecology. The rural counties of Gwynedd, Ceredigion and Powys each support the Circuit and their own venues directly through grant aid and while each county has worked hard to limit the cuts, cuts have had to be made.

Any cuts to our partner organisations, for example of Communities First, county youth services and school budgets, will also have a direct impact on the work we do and the communities we most want to reach. For example we are looking to work with the school in Blaenau Ffestiniog on a film making project, looking at the difference between coming of age in Blaenau today and the lives depicted in the first Welsh language film, Y Chwarelwyr, made in the slate mines there. The work would rely on support from Film Agency's First Light programme and Communities First as well as other regeneration partners.

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

There is currently no adequate baseline data mapping participation in the arts across Wales, and without that it is hard to prove where the gaps are in either geographical or social terms. However, what we do know from research and experience is that participatory arts activity often clusters around those individuals who have the skills and resources to encourage and support groups. For example, last year Powys County Council conducted an audit of Children and Young Peoples' Arts Activities across the county which showed that while there was PCC funded youth theatre work in Llandrindod Wells via Theatr Powys, which was one of the organisations cut by ACW, there was also some great, unfunded work run by volunteer led youth theatres in Welshpool (out of Theatr Clara in the High School) and in Brecon at Theatr Brycheiniog. All public bodies in Wales will have published a strategic equality plan by April 2012.

There were very few communities within rural Powys where the Review found no arts activity, but there were some including Llanwrtyd Wells. It could be that there is genuinely no arts activity there, I wrote the review and tried hard to find it, but I suspect that whatever happens there has no connection to national umbrella bodies or to groups outside the town – and their enthusiastic individuals have focussed on bog snorkelling and the man versus horse race rather than the arts. Despite these gaps, having supported the Review, Powys now has a clearer picture and at least a snapshot of arts provision for Children and Young People on which to base policy.

Cytser's work has been designed on the basis that the whole of Meirionydd was poorly served by the arts, and likely to become more so with the cuts in provision at Theatr Harlech. Without major towns or communities, and with the theatre partly closed and without staff, it is easy to miss Meirionydd from tour schedule and head up to Galleri instead. Yet, would you drive from Harlech or Blaenau to Caernarfon and back at night to go to the theatre? By taking the arts to smaller communities we are working hard, with very limited resources, to address this imbalance.

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

Where the agendas of arts organisations and meet those of other agencies, it is possible to find alternative sources of funding. However, this is reliant on:-

- Those agencies having funding to give
- Finding the key person in those agencies who understands the instrumental role the arts can play as partners in delivering their work.
- The arts organisation having the time and resources itself to approach these agencies, and the ability to take time out to think creatively about its own funding needs and how they can meet other agendas.

Like most organisations arts groups are struggling with increased workloads and reduced staffing levels so it is often hard to make the link between alternative funding and their core work.

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

Most of the participation in the arts in Wales is through the voluntary arts. It is generally organically grown, community based, not in need of public funding support and invisible to policy makers and arts funders.

It is best supported through the umbrella bodies whose role it is to provide information and resources to that sector for example the Drama Association of Wales, Voluntary Arts Wales and national bodies such as Making Music and National Operatic Drama Association.

On a more local level, small scale participatory arts organisations are looking to larger groups to support them through the intricacies of funding applications and the need to put policies and structures in place. For example, Cytser has worked with volunteers to put together a day of Jazz in Barmouth, we do not have money to give but can support and advise them through the process. While CVCs can offer some of this work, many arts groups do not identify themselves with the voluntary sector and many CVC staff do not feel they have the expertise to support their needs.

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

Realistically the strategic relationship between the Government and arts funders is likely to have little impact on participation levels, other than in terms of the targets set by the remit letter as priorities for support. Where a key difference could be made is in inter-departmental terms for example, the loss of the imperative to include an arts experience in each key stage of education has meant some schools choose not to do this – reinstating that would make an immediate difference. In addition, building a transport budget into schools programmes would make another huge difference in access to participation in the arts by rural children.

Also the use of the arts to deliver wider regeneration agendas currently relies on the interests and enthusiasms of individual officers. A broader policy step to look at the use of all manner of arts activities in programmes designed to deliver increased skills and confidence within communities would also directly increase participation.

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?

I personally can't see this making a difference. The other key issue is that once you start talking about increasing participation by key target groups you are talking more about professionally led community arts provision rather than local voluntary arts groups whose focus is naturally on their own participation in a particular activity.

Without baseline data, it is impossible to prove current levels of participation in the arts let alone increases due to policy or development initiatives. However, we do know from anecdote and experience that there is a massive amount of voluntary arts activity taking place in communities right across Wales.

In order to increase participation by specific groups, and I would assume for the sake of this review that these would be defined by income level, ethnicity, educational attainment or some other aspect of

likely to increase deprivation indices, you would need to invest in a programme of specifically targeted arts activities run by skilled community arts professionals and monitored according to a tight programme of personal and social evaluation which proved changes in skill levels and attitudes throughout the programme. This could be done either through direct investment in arts groups to meet social targets or through working with arts groups towards wider social and economic agendas much as the Communities First programme has done where arts has been used towards its wider goals.

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