

Task and Finish Group on Participation in the Arts

Response from Performing Arts at Aberystwyth Arts Centre

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

All groups participate in a variety of arts activities, both within the building, in specialist spaces, and in their own communities as outreach work. Most activities are open to all, though certain types of activity are limited to children and young people and have age limits, partly for safety reasons. General activities are usually open to all adults from age 15 with no upper limit or requirement for experience. Activities take place in English and in Welsh. For the very young, there are arts activities where babies and toddlers are accompanied by their parent or carer.

A few participatory CPD and training courses are restricted to professional artists or those aspiring to be so.

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

On the whole there hasn't been a marked decrease in participation levels in the past three years; a few activities have suffered a drop of around 5% and there is little growth, but most classes and workshops have continued as usual, particularly those for young people.

It may be worth stating that the community arts and education programmes at our arts centre have been historically under-resourced and under-staffed for many years. We are obliged to charge for the majority of our activities simply to cover the guest artist costs and this may over a long period have had some impact on the overall accessibility to some groups. However, post code studies have shown that we have a very large attendance from Communities First areas, so there's no direct causal relationship.

Budgetary considerations do mean that the range of activities we can offer are limited to those we are able to gain a reasonable number of paying participants for, mainly regular weekly classes. We're not able to offer free arts projects for schools or community groups, or people who can't afford to pay fees; the current Reach the heights programme is an exception to this, but is of course time limited and for very specific types of participant.

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

Please see above; in addition, over the past 10 years, there has been some decrease in engagement with and in schools; however the reasons for this are more complex than simply budgetary ones, including curricular pressures, health and safety and equality rules.

We are starting to see families with more than one child making careful choices about the number of activities their children take part in, but we do offer concessions for the second child and there is no marked decline. However, the range of people taking part has always been limited by the fact that we have to charge.

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

It's certainly more difficult to engage with rural schools and youth groups where the costs of buses or other transport can be preventative. However we do offer some outreach work.

Without some more intensive research, it's hard to know to what extent the fact that we have to charge for most of our activities is excluding some groups – our participation levels remain high and we do gain many participants from Communities First areas. But we know that not everyone in our local area is able to attend because of charges and/or travel costs.

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

No, very little external funding is available to support participatory activity other than ACW and earned income. There are few large businesses in our region so sponsorship isn't an option. It would be helpful if a multi-artform organisation like our own were able to apply for more than one project grant from ACW to support participatory and CPD projects.

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

I'm unclear what this signifies.

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

The reach the heights project has been a good example of how beneficial the relationship between WAG, ACW, LAs and individual arts organisations can be in terms of supporting participations.

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 believe that most organizations like our own are already aware of our obligations in this respect and are fulfilling them to the best of our ability.