

Task and Finish Group on Participation in the Arts in Wales

Inquiry into Participation in the Arts in Wales

Response from Cytser

1. What organisation do you represent?

Cytser – The Constellation Project Cytser is a participation and performance based project, based in Southern Snowdonia, which grew out of the outreach work of Theatr Harlech and is now managed and supported by the Mid Wales Circuit.

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

Our work is based across the Meirionydd area of Gwynedd and we work with all ages but with a focus on children and young people, areas of economic and social deprivation including Blaenau Ffestiniog, Barmouth and other Communities First areas as well as with groups such as Gwynedd Youth Service and Gwynedd Domestic Abuse Forum.

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

The future of Theatr Harlech is still uncertain, following its core funding cut by ACW, and Cytser is one of few organisations working in the Meirionydd area. We employ only one full time Artistic Director and share other staff with Theatr Hafren in Newtown (Marketing) and the Circuit (General Manager). In hard times, Gwynedd is an easy area to cut from tours or projects because the geography and sparse population mean it is an expensive place to work. We are increasingly finding our work is unique in its diversity and in being rooted so firmly in this area. We have needed to be extremely flexible and creative in sharing resources with partner organisations to bring high quality performances and participatory projects to isolated and remote communities. At the moment much of our work is funded by CADW as part of a large production at Harlech Castle through Cauldrons and Furnaces but this is tied to the Olympics and we are not certain where funding could be found to work on this scale again – a full theatre production with 350 children, weeks of music and costume workshops in schools, choreographers and technical support.

4. Do you think that certain groups of people have been affected more than others?

The proposed changes to Communities First will certainly affect a lot of community based arts work in deprived areas. Increasingly arts groups rely on non-arts funding support to deliver work with target groups and partnerships

with Communities First have been key to this for many organisations. Cuts to schools budgets have also had a massive effect already in terms of work in education. The cost of transport means we have run all our workshops within schools so that children do not need to pay to travel to rehearsals – this means they do not get the full theatre experience but without it schools would not be willing to sign up to join in shows. The same concern applied to Schools Film Week where we subsidised buses to transport children who would not be able to attend even a free film showing otherwise. We are aware through our work with the Circuit that school transport is a major issue in all venues and would love to see this addressed to increase childrens' access to arts experiences.

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

Meirionydd is, because of its geography and demographics, poorly served by the arts. Our work is funded by the Lottery and Gwynedd CC to address this but our funding is annually renewed with ACW and it is increasingly difficult to fit what is in fact an ongoing and sustainable organisation into Lottery funding targets.

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

For an organisation with only one full time staff member fundraising to support the work we do would be impossible. At present we rely on the Circuit's part-time Coordinator to manage our finances and funding applications. The core of our work is, and we believe should be, supported by ACW and Gwynedd County Council. However, for project based work we rely on small grants and service level agreements to agencies and this is a common situation for community based arts groups. Our problem is that our track record shows we can work with communities to produce large scale, spectacular work which has both a genuine impact on their lives, confidence and skill levels and a real artistic impact and integrity. Making a film with ten children in Barmouth, supported by the Youth Service, is great and has a real impact on those 10 children who use the medium to explore issues from their own lives. However, giving 350 children the chance to make and present a grand scale performance at Harlech Castle has given them an immense sense of pride and ownership of what is an iconic and sometime oppressive building dominating their community and landscape – and to explore the history and significance of the castle which many children from Blaenau and Twywn had not visited themselves. We, and many other organisations, need a secure funding base from which to build and yet we are still annually funded, project based and first in line for cuts while the arts are non-statutory provision.

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

The majority of rural Wales' communities are home to choirs, amateur theatre groups, Young Farmers and a vast array of organisations which support the infrastructure of arts participation. We are lucky to have a strong musical and artistic tradition in rural Wales, and the Urdd, Eisteddfod and others play a key role in creating both the artists and public speakers of the future. Time to confess, I ran the Voluntary Arts Wales development team, supported by Objective 5B and then Objective One funding. Our development workers were able to sit alongside community and voluntary arts groups and support them with issues such as CRB checking, fundraising, marketing and business planning. The work the development team did was exemplary...but expensive. What support is available now depends on individual community networks, CVCs etc and their enthusiasm for and understanding of the arts. Many arts groups do not see themselves as part of the voluntary sector but as focussed on the art form they support. The language they use is not about participation and community enrichment, or even about providing services, but about singing every Wednesday and practicing for performances in local churches, at open gardens and in community centres. In many ways Cytser is being asked to fill the gaps and help participatory arts groups work through funding and organisational issues – for example setting up a jazz weekend in Barmouth or promoting amateur shows. We do not have the resources to help financially but do offer advice and professional support which is invaluable and helps build the arts ecology of the region.

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

Strategic relationships would struggle to increase participation. It is an organic and grass roots movement. What is needed is setting in which it can thrive – so advice and support, affordable venues for classes and rehearsals, a sense of a wider movement which connects theatres and arts centres to those who support them both as audience members and as participants – and there is a big cross over between the two. Much participatory arts activity will never be funded by ACW but the umbrella bodies which support it could be and the bodies which are supported by ACW funds have a role to play in supporting participatory activities within their catchment – but through choice and a sense of genuine partnership not because they are told to do so by the Assembly or in their Annual Review with ACW.

9. 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 think it is a long way from the plans to a real difference at grass roots level. I also think there is not adequate baseline information against which to measure an increase in participation which is a problem any development in this area would face.