

Task and Finish Group on Participation in the Arts in Wales

Inquiry into Participation in the Arts in Wales

Response from Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council

1. What organisation do you represent?

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council

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

Participation in our arts activities is varied. Generally they are people who live or work in the county borough of Blaenau Gwent and are very local to the activity taking place. The demographic varies depending on what's on offer, however there are things such as our regular programme of dance activities that tend to attract a high percentage of girls and women to participate while our outreach programme in schools or community groups tends to be more involved with young people. Where possible we try and provide a varied arts outreach programme in all parts of the county borough that compliments the other activities on offer.

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

There have been limited budget changes within the programme of work that is delivered from a core budget perspective and links with organisations such as Head for Arts (the community arts organisation for the Heads of the Valleys region) has enhanced the programme on offer to some extent. However we are aware that people's disposable income levels have changed and that therefore people are prioritising more how they spend their spare money. While we have not seen a significant decrease in numbers of participants, we are experiencing people needing to seek financial assistance to attend. We have considered offering our programmes for free however we feel that this devalues a service that is already being subsidised from the core budget and that people still need to pay to appreciate the high quality of service on offer.

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

It is possible that these changes have affected those living in the most deprived communities more than others however we have a history of working with these groups of people and try where possible to offer this service in the hearts of communities to ensure that they are as accessible as possible. There are instances however where community venues are not as available due to

budgetary and human resource constraints to make this happen or that escalating fuel and hire costs make this less possible

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

We are very fortunate in Blaenau Gwent to have a wealth of community arts groups operating in the area so that people are able to join local societies such as choirs, brass bands or operatic groups and participate in their chosen genre. There is also an increase in the number of opportunities to engage in arts and crafts based work as the demand for this grows particularly among young people. However it is increasingly difficult to find suitably qualified / experienced community arts practitioners who are prepared to travel or work limited hours in the South Wales Valleys and as such it is likely that the gaps lie in the quality of provision and the availability of affordable specialist art forms (such as break dancing) available not necessarily linked to geography or demography which limits the offer available locally. Other issues relating to quality are those around local groups and organisations not valuing the professional arts practice of community arts practitioners and opting instead to 'train' people in a weekend to be a dance practitioner or using someone who can play the guitar to teach a group to do so – these devalue the work being done by professionals and make it increasingly difficult to make the case for the proper payment of artists in communities as well as potentially jeopardising people's experience of the arts.

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

Little is known about other possible sources of funding for the arts, particularly not for smaller pockets of funding and money to pay artists (often seen as a revenue rather than a project cost). Often groups are looking for a few thousand pounds to run a scheme of work over a year and there are limited pots available with a quick turnaround to enable this work to happen (and encourage creativity and monitoring of artistic quality among participation in the arts). Sports Wales's model of Community Chest seems a really positive one and it may be worth considering looking at the viability of a similar model suited to community arts to assist with these issues among local groups, organisations and societies.

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

In general there are a lot of participatory opportunities promoted through the voluntary arts sector however these are not always based on strong foundations e.g. professional practitioners, sound business awareness etc. which makes

their capacity limited. Funding is usually an issue with groups consistently seeking alternative sources of money just to survive and put on an annual event. Generally arts based groups have a sound understanding of the arts and its possibilities but may need help around the more practical issues of running a group such as Child Protection, licensing, marketing, funding – in this vicinity however this support is readily available through the local authority arts and culture service and its partnerships with organisations such as Audiences Wales. There are however voluntary groups that promote the arts or use occasional arts based interventions to address wider social issues or because there is a distinct community or individual need and these often have little knowledge of the specific art form and the need to engage professional practitioners to deliver or advise on how best to proceed with projects / events – this support is again readily available through the local authority arts and culture service but probably not as well utilised or known about. Support for the voluntary arts sector is strong in certain elements (NODA for example does a lot of positive work with local operatic groups). Voluntary Arts Wales is an organisation that was heavily involved in assisting voluntary groups in a variety of ways through information and training days as well as face to face support but this role has dwindled over time and with funding decreases this has become a service that is not as well-known and is delivering with limited capacity so has less impact than its counterparts elsewhere in the UK.

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

There seems to be a general even distribution of funding to support participation across Wales and this would support the strategic effort being made. However with increased pressure to deliver outcomes, there is a greater focus on delivering measurable achievement with target audiences and as a result participation figures may not increase where the quality and depth of service being delivered is improved with greater, more tangible results. A decision needs to be made as to whether the quality of service and the impact on the individual is more important than having a quantifiable number of people simply 'taking part' in the arts. A mixture of both is obviously the ideal but with funding and budgets becoming increasingly limited it would be prudent to develop mechanisms that show the power of participation in the arts and encourage more investment as well as greater 'buy-in' from agencies who deliver projects to see the arts as a viable delivery option.

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?

This duty will obviously take time to have a true effect on participation among under-represented groups in Wales however it is difficult to know how this might be achieved and whether the arts is the thing to engage them or no.

While the arts have the power to give individual and groups a voice, mechanisms need to be developed to communicate this effectively and people working in the public sector will need to develop a greater awareness of who these under-represented groups are in this area and how best to target them to be able to deliver projects / activities that are wanted and needed and thus encourage participation. The duty in itself will raise awareness of the need to be mindful of equalities issues but the key is to engage officers effectively so that they have the tools by which to operate and fully engage with this ethos of working for it to have a true impact.