

Task and Finish Group on Participation in the Arts in Wales

Inquiry into Participation in the Arts in Wales

Response from Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff

1. What organisation do you represent?

Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff

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

Chapter is a popular, thriving venue attracting the widest variety of users, supported by our open door policy and inclusive social ethos. We welcome over 750,000 visits each year and offer 1,000s of opportunities to participate across a wide range of artforms and other cultural activities. Groups who participate in our activities range from parents and babies to the over 70s, from school groups to young offenders, local people from Canton and Riverside to disabled people and specialist interest groups.

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

Increasing participation in the arts isn't easy. It's not just about giving people opportunities to participate, it's about developing and implementing strategies to change attitudes and promote the advantages that participation brings...and this takes investment. Arts organisations are working in an increasingly complex environment with a focus that is shifting from presentation and quality to a recognition of the importance of increasing access to and experience with the arts. Many organisations need support to define and refine their approaches but also the stimulus to re-examine their missions and their roles. Participation continues to increase at Chapter but there are always tensions about how we prioritise our budgets. We've needed to develop smarter strategies to increase participation that allow us to access new income streams. Some of these include making our social and hires spaces work harder for us and make more earned income to invest in encouraging participation. They also include spearheading new partnerships and collaborations that allow combined budgets and skills to go farther and be more effective. It also includes taking a wider definition of arts and looking at other cultural opportunities for a deeper engagement with the centre whether that's our community garden and bee hives or opening up our spaces for events as diverse as sustainability, food fares and exercise classes.

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

Developing participation takes investment. Developing participation amongst groups that traditionally don't engage with the arts inevitably takes more investment – in both time and money – but also in ideas, commitment and strategy. Current strategies across Wales tend to emphasise individuals' socio-demographics rather than their motivations and attitudes and this can place further pressure on organisations who are trying to reach people of all ages, abilities and backgrounds who, for whatever reason, lack the motivation to participate regardless of opportunity.

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

We should be wary of oversimplifying the process an individual goes through in deciding to participate in the arts which is rarely about demographics or geography alone. By thinking about motivations and attitudes first, provision second we can start to help organisations develop plans that can genuinely influence people's participation behaviour. This needs joined-up thinking and joined-up action across funders, organisations and sectors.

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

One of the key challenges is that funding to support participation initiatives is done on a project by project basis. This is particularly true of sources of funding outside ACW. Funding core costs allows stability and the ability to develop a sustained approach across several years. Changing attitudes doesn't happen overnight. One-off projects can be successful but need to be part of a longer, wider strategy to reap real rewards. Allow ACW to lead on this, working with local and national government to ensure that limited resources are used effectively and in joined-up ways. There is increasing competition for other funding sources, often through trusts and sponsorships. Larger organisations across the UK employ teams dedicated to attracting these funds and this makes it even more difficult for smaller groups to successfully raise alternative funds. This impacts even organisations the size of Chapter (we employ one full-time fundraiser) with many trusts, foundations and commercial sponsors increasingly reluctant to take risks on unknown quantities.

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

The voluntary arts sector plays a valued role but cannot be seen as a replacement for the professional sector.

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

The key word here is strategic. ACW and many councils across Wales are effectively distributing funds that have allowed participation to flourish. But there is still work to be done. It's worth looking at recent successes in Scotland and seeing how these can be emulated here.

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?

We would like to see Wales develop a uniquely Welsh policy making participation in the arts compulsory for statutory authorities. Research has shown that there is a direct link between arts participation and increased literacy; participation in music and visual arts link to being above average in maths, reading and behaviour; arts participation makes a more significant difference to students from low socio-economic groups. At Chapter we're well aware of the many studies that suggest that moving image participation has many positive consequences for children and young people including improving disruptive behaviour, promoting cultural diversity and fostering creativity and empowerment. The advantages are clear.