



Creative Lives

July 2021

Paper for the Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport and International Relations Committee

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic has reaffirmed the vital importance of participation in everyday creativity for individuals and communities.

Creative Lives

Creative Lives (formerly Voluntary Arts) is a registered charity established in 1991, that champions community and volunteer-led creative activity. We work to improve opportunities for everyone to be creative and, in particular, celebrate and promote people expressing themselves creatively with others, recognising the benefits this brings to both individuals and communities.

Creative Lives works with communities, organisations, policy-makers, funders and creative individuals as a voice for positive change, to improve and expand the landscape in which creative participation can take place.

Overview of the sector

The voluntary arts sector in Wales is extensive, and includes choirs, brass bands, knitting groups, craft clubs, theatre groups, festivals, folk dancing, dyeing and weaving, quilting, sculpting and painting, and many more artforms. Welsh Government estimates that there are around 4,000 amateur arts, culture and heritage groups in Wales. Information from the Wales Council for Voluntary Action's All Wales Third Sector Database puts the figure at 3,233 – but it is likely that many more informal and unconstituted groups add to this number.

Benefits of participation in creative activity

Creative expression in all its forms is a fundamental part of being human. Voluntary creative groups contribute a huge amount to the cultural and civic life of communities in Wales. There are extensive proven benefits to regular participation in creative activities:

- personal satisfaction;
- improved mood and resilience;
- increased social connection;
- improved physical and mental health;
- and skills development.

What is the current impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on your sector?

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the country has been devastating, challenging and liberating. And this has also been the picture for the arts sector as a whole. We know that some creative groups were in abeyance until such time as they could meet again safely in person, where others have dissolved. But many voluntary creative groups have found ways of continuing their activities online: choir singalongs; pre-recorded or live demonstrations of visual arts and crafts; creative challenges on social media etc. Where remote access was unavailable or problematic, groups have maintained contact and creative activity via post, telephone and local radio.

In late 2020 we conducted our annual survey of creative participation, the Big Conversation, which found that despite the obvious challenges, the voluntary arts sector remained optimistic and resilient. We had previously identified that groups engaged in voluntary creativity were positive in their outlook, and during the pandemic, there was only a small overall dent in confidence from participants and group leaders who responded to the survey about the continuation of their creative activities.

Coping creatively

It is clear that during these most difficult times, being creative is vitally important as a coping mechanism, a way of retaining a sense of normality and maintaining a degree of connection with others in the community, and a meaningful activity to pursue. We now have an opportunity to cultivate this growing interest and ensure that opportunities to take part regularly in creative activity are recognised, supported and available to all.

What further support is needed from the Welsh and UK Governments both to mitigate the impact of the pandemic and enable the post-pandemic recovery?

In late 2020, we published a report, **Common Ground: Rewilding the Garden**, the culmination of an ambitious programme of work investigating how creative activity is supported in areas of socio-economic deprivation across the UK and Republic of Ireland. Despite the diversity of creative activity across the nations, there were striking commonalities in benefits and in support needs.

In line with our strategic framework, Creative Lives is seeking opportunities to influence local and national policy to drive these priorities into tangible outcomes for communities, such as increased investment, collaborative working opportunities and further research and recognition.



Our recommendations:

1. To open up more public spaces for creative cultural activity

Certain structural conditions enable grassroots creative groups to thrive. Public policy decisions about buildings have implications for the cultural life of communities, and the wellbeing of individuals. We need to protect and promote civic spaces such as arts venues, community centres, village halls, parks and libraries for voluntary creative activity, to ensure people can participate in their own neighbourhoods.

2. To build strong connections and relationships to support participation in creative cultural activity

We tend to talk of the arts as an ecosystem, but voluntary creative groups are often disconnected and isolated from the wider arts sector. We need to connect all these parts in a movement of local, regional and national networks, across communities of place and interest, in order to develop a more mutually-supportive environment for creative cultural activity.

3. To recognise how taking part in creative cultural activity improves social connectedness

It is clear that there is a huge resource of grassroots arts groups across the country with an important contribution to make to bringing people together and maintaining individual and community health and wellbeing. Coming together with others in a shared creative purpose is often a crucial step in reducing loneliness and isolation, and as such is a vital preventative measure across public policy agendas.

As we look ahead to a period of recovery and rebuilding, we need to reconnect the disparate parts of our cultural landscape, so that everyone has the opportunity to improve their quality of life through regular participation in creative activity.

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