

Inquiry into the Welsh Government's plans for a National Contemporary Art Gallery

June 2023

Response from Cultural Freelancers Wales

About Cultural Freelancers Wales (CFW)

www.cfw.wales

Running since 2020, CFW is a collective of cultural freelancers in Wales. Our aims are to strengthen the freelance voice through lobbying and advocating for freelancer needs; and to offer inclusive support to fellow freelancers through upskilling workshops, networking opportunities, and commissions. We are bilingual, and operate across Wales. We champion inclusive practice, and are currently a majority disabled-led team.

CFW are supported by an Arts Council of Wales Connect and Flourish grant. Our partners are Arts and Business Cymru, Disability Arts Cymru, People Make it Work, and Race Council Cymru.

Freelancers and the National Contemporary Art Gallery

The Welsh Government has been extremely supportive of the arts since its inception and careful in its decision making; its support of freelancers during the pandemic was commendable, but much remains to be done to strengthen the freelance sector, and to build upon this precedent. The National Contemporary Art Gallery is an opportunity to begin to address this.

Freelancers are a vital part of our cultural sector. For museums and art galleries across Wales they represent an invaluable talent pool, without whom many of their activities could not be delivered.

- There are around 8,500 freelancers in Wales, constituting around half of all individuals working in the cultural sector.
- Contemporary artists are mostly freelance or self-employed; and, the sector relies on the skills of freelancers with wider skill sets such as technicians and gallery support; conservators; film-makers, photographers and digital content creators; as well as artists, writers, and creatives working in other arts sectors.
- Their skills and experiences are essential for a thriving contemporary art scene.

Freelancers will be crucial for the successful delivery of the proposed National Contemporary Art Gallery. But their contribution is undervalued, and overlooked; and the current health of the freelance sector is precarious.

- Our 2022 report, [Road to Recovery?](#) highlighted the uncertainty of the future facing cultural freelancers in Wales, particularly following the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Freelance income is way below average in the cultural sector, and freelancers face less job security and benefits compared to salaried staff.
- Almost a quarter of freelancers are uncertain whether to stay in the industry.
- This points to the precarious nature of future prospects for the freelance sector, and the urgent need to strengthen the sector in order to avoid a deficit in cultural capital.

Delivery of the Welsh Government's plans for a national contemporary art gallery

The National Contemporary Art Gallery provides an exciting **opportunity to develop and embed a new, equitable and inclusive strategic approach to working with cultural freelancers**. It is a chance to develop and implement best practice guidelines and commit to socially sustainable goals, giving freelancers better and more equitable access to opportunities, and in doing so enriching and investing in the future of contemporary art in Wales.

We recommend that freelancers across Wales are invited to contribute to discussions about the delivery of the National Contemporary Art Gallery. It is critical that this should be offered **as a paid opportunity**. As individuals whose income is significantly lower compared to equivalent salaried staff in organisations, many freelancers cannot afford to give their time for free, and so their voices are often excluded from discussions which directly impact them. Those from marginalised backgrounds, with protected characteristics, and those with caring responsibilities are most likely to face financial barriers to participating – and these are among the voices that most need to be heard.

The merits of the dispersed model, building on existing assets proposed by the Welsh Government (8-10 regional sites, and an anchor hub)

The dispersed model provides an excellent opportunity to **engage freelancers more equitably across Wales**. The pandemic highlighted the many freelancers around Wales who feel remote and isolated, and cut off from opportunities in the cultural sector at large. Our [Road to Recovery?](#) 2022 report

showed that about 41% of cultural freelancers in Wales are located in rural areas, and that they face many infrastructural challenges which contribute to a lack of access to work opportunities.

Improving infrastructure and geographic equity was one of the recommendations we presented to Welsh Government and the Arts Council of Wales in 2022, and having a dispersed model would be one step towards achieving this. By embedding contemporary arts provision in a variety of geographical locations across Wales, local freelance communities would be given more opportunities to engage with the national collection, nurturing a greater sense of ownership and raising aspirations.

However, in the face of the climate crisis, **environmental impact will be a critical consideration**. The dispersed model will require transporting artworks across the country, which is a significant environmental cost. The environmental impact should be carefully considered and informed by expert advice before any decisions are made to ensure that the cultural and social benefits are not pursued at the expense of the environment.

The factors that should be considered when assessing the suitability of candidate sites for the various galleries

- **Transport infrastructure and parking facilities**, including nearby disabled parking
- **Physical accessibility** (all floors and spaces are accessible through lifts and ramps; wide doorways and corridors for people using mobility equipment; automatic doors / doors that open with a button rather than heavy doors; gallery spaces large enough to accommodate at least 1.3 metres between furniture, plinths and object)
- **Accessible toilet facilities** - Changing Spaces (or the ability to create one)
- **A quiet space** that can be offered as prayer room, or a place to rest for people with sensory impairments
- **The suitability of the building for hosting contemporary art** (large, accessible loading bays for the delivery of artworks; large heavy goods lifts; climate controlled storage areas – long-term and short-term storage; climate controlled gallery spaces; potentially reinforced ceilings and floors; equipped studio spaces for technicians / conservators / photographers; gallery doors wide enough to accommodate large artworks and machinery like cherry pickers; the ability to control lighting levels; staff offices)
- **First Aid** room / facilities
- Fully accessible **welcome and orientation area**

- Learning / creative public workshop spaces
- Suitable space for a **café / restaurant**
- Suitable space for a **shop**

The merits of digital access to contemporary art

Centralised digital access to contemporary art is a good idea, and is worth consideration. However it should not be seen as a replacement to physical access. **Instead, the physical and digital experiences should serve to enhance one another.** Physical access brings many experiential, social and wellbeing benefits that cannot be replicated in digital form. Equally, digital experiences can offer benefits that the physical experience does not, particularly around accessibility for people who are unable to visit in-person due to geographical location, or mobility challenges.

There have been many advancements in **digital accessibility**, particularly since the pandemic, and a digital platform has the potential for hosting content that makes contemporary art more accessible for disabled audiences – such as Audio Descriptions and Alt text for blind or partially blind people; BSL video captions; closed captions; video transcripts; and easy-read descriptions.

Consideration needs to be given to the **long-term sustainability** of any digital contemporary art platform. It is a huge undertaking – the initial digitisation process itself is costly and time-consuming, and issues around copyright permissions for contemporary artworks are complex and can slow the process down. However, once the platform is created it will also need an ongoing team dedicated to updating and maintaining the content. Investment can't be limited to the initial set-up phase – it needs to be long-term and sustainable. The [Art UK](#) website is a good benchmark for this.

If the digital platform is meant to be a resource for everyone in Wales, there has to be more freedom for people to use digital images through **creative commons and / or public domain licences**. High image licensing fees restrict creative access, publication of, and research into contemporary art. Often the rates are too high for freelancers to even consider. Furthermore, the fees often go to the third-party institutions (such as museums and libraries) who hold the work in their collections, rather than the artists who created the work in the first place. This creates a power imbalance, where large publicly funded institutions restrict access to, and profit off the use of digital images. Furthermore this poses a threat to the contemporary art sector, because it restricts fair creative exchange and publications about contemporary art.