National Contemporary Art Gallery
Engagement findings

August 2023

As part of the **Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport, and International Relations Committee** inquiry into the Welsh Government's plans for a **National Contemporary Art Gallery**, the Citizen Engagement Team proposed a qualitative approach to engagement, comprising of six focus groups. This paper communicates the findings.

Background

1.   As part of its inquiry on the National Contemporary Art Gallery, the Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport, and International Relations Committee were interested to hear the views of artists, gallery staff, friends and supporters of art galleries on the merits of the model proposed by the Welsh Government.

Engagement

2.   Between 24 July and 8 August 2023, six online focus groups were conducted by the Citizen Engagement Team. The purpose of the focus groups was to provide the Committee with the views of stakeholders on the Welsh Government plans for a National Contemporary Art Gallery and the digital access to contemporary art.

Participants

3.   29 participants took part in the focus groups. Participants included academics, national and international Wales based artists, gallery staff and members of art charities and organisations.

4.   Some of the participants were associated with the venues shortlisted as members of the network of galleries for the National Contemporary Art Gallery. Other participants were associated with venues bidding for the anchor site for the gallery.

5.   Participants were sourced via a screening survey sent to over 25 individual artists, over 20 galleries (both public and private), and over 15 art charities or organisations associated with art across Wales.

6.   All venues shortlisted as members of the network of galleries for the National Contemporary Art Gallery were invited to take part in the focus groups.

7.   The Citizen Engagement Team liaised with relevant stakeholders (for example, Disability Arts Cymru and Race Council Cymru) to ensure fair, diverse and inclusive representation in the focus groups.

8.   Participants came from all five regions of the Senedd.

9.   Thank you to everyone who contributed to the programme of engagement.

Methodology

10.   All focus groups were held online to enable as many as possible of the identified participants to take part.

11.   The following discussion points were addressed during the focus groups:

- What are the merits of the model proposed by the Welsh Government for a National Contemporary Art Gallery?

- What are the challenges of the model proposed?

- What difference will it make to people and their communities that they will be able to access contemporary art locally?

- What will be the advantages, if any, of the digital access to contemporary art?

▪ What will be the disadvantages, if any, of the digital access to contemporary art?

Key themes

Merits of the Welsh Government plans for a National Contemporary Art Gallery

12. All participants agreed that a National Contemporary Art Gallery would have great potential in order to promote artists, create jobs for artists and practitioners and help promote Wales.

13. The majority of participants were supportive of the Welsh Government plans for a dispersed model.

14. Participants agreed that one of the main merits of the dispersed model will be giving access to the national collection, across Wales. Potentially, it will identify it nationally and internationally.

15. Many participants, both artists and gallery staff, spoke of the potential of the National Contemporary Art Gallery for Welsh artists and Wales based artists on an international level.

16. Participants shared their vision of new commissions that will respond to the national collection ensuring that the collection itself does not remain static.

17. Participants were pleased that the Welsh Government plans for the National Contemporary Art Gallery seem to have gained momentum during recent months.

18. All participants agreed that the launch of the new website, **Celf ar y Cyd**, in June 2023, was a significant milestone in the progression of the Welsh Government plans for a National Contemporary Art Gallery.

> *"I'm not sure that everybody involved understands the scale of this ... what this could be, and in essence needs to be, if it's going to be good enough. If we're going to do it, we have to do it properly."*
>
> *"[We need] to lift this from 'here is our collection and we're making it more accessible' which is of course brilliant, to 'Let's really raise the bar for what Welsh art means, internationally'."*

Dispersed model

19.   The majority of participants agreed that the dispersed model is a strong model. It is well suited for Wales, where both the anchor site and the network galleries could be utilised to share national collections.

20.   Participants felt this was an opportunity to do something different and innovative with contemporary art in Wales as well as raise awareness of the national collection on a local level.

21.   Assuming that all venues listed for the network galleries within the dispersed model will come to fruition, participants agreed that the venues listed demonstrated a good demographic spread across Wales, including rural areas.

22.   Many participants suggested that the network galleries are the key 'strand' to the dispersed model in allowing people to access the national collection and contemporary art in Wales.

23.   Participants suggested this was a unique opportunity for galleries who are part of the Welsh Government plans, to develop as galleries and work in partnership to promote contemporary art in Wales.

24.   Some participants mentioned how worthwhile it has been to date. Working with other network galleries has been beneficial through sharing ideas, experiences and expertise.

25.   Some participants suggested that having work curated and exhibited differently, and more diversely in various venues, would benefit all.

26.   Other participants mentioned how the network galleries, in particular, could develop expertise in different *genres* within the national collection.

27.   Participants agreed that all 'strands' of the National Contemporary Art Gallery's hub and spoke model should support local artist activity.

28.   Some participants suggested that being able to access art locally could encourage people to invest and buy artwork.

29.   Some participants mentioned the value of the dispersed model in the context of the age of Artificial Intelligence. The opportunity to be able to access art locally would contribute to the need for responding as humans to complex ideas through contemporary art.

30. Participants mentioned the shift to the increase in working remotely and working flexible hours, especially since the pandemic. Being able to access the national collection in their local community could make a difference to people as they possibly spend their time differently and reassess their work-life balance.

> *"Taking art to various parts of the country, especially taking it away from where we are now in south-east Wales is admirable and should be supported."*
>
> *"The fact that [Wales] is geographically diverse but also geographically small makes it eminently suitable for this kind of model ... each of the venues is very distinctive in their own way."*
>
> *"It's given us [the network galleries] the opportunity to develop professionally."*
>
> *"... being able to curate it differently in different spaces ... that seems to me to be wholly positive."*
>
> *"I don't think we're screaming enough about Welsh art, this would be a great way to do it. I feel very strongly about it."*
>
> *"The anchor site has to be a trophy building, that's important, it needs to be a destination ... but I also think what's important is the dissemination of art ... that's what going to help the fostering of contemporary art in Wales. There's a lot of talent in Wales that's not being exploited."*

Anchor site

31. Participants suggested the anchor site should be rooted in Welsh history, with international significance. For example, the history of past industries in both north and south Wales. This would bind Welsh heritage and culture with contemporary art and allow people to respond to it.

32. Participants mentioned that this principle should be reflected in the network galleries too - using relevant artworks from the national collection to introduce and enrich understanding of local history.

33.   Many participants suggested that the anchor site should be 'iconic' and should act as a parent site. Other participants described it as a potential 'trophy building'.

34.   Few participants mentioned the Yorkshire Sculpture Park - which has developed from being a small college to an extraordinary park and hub – as a good model to follow for the anchor site.

> *"There is a history of people coming to Wales and working in Wales and being supported and being inspired by Wales and producing international quality of work … The anchor site has a responsibility to support new work being produced here in Wales."*
>
> *"Being able to make sure there is access across the whole country seems like a brilliant thing to do, but there is also strength in having an anchor site as well, because you kind of need a central place that can support that network … like a parent site."*

Anticipated impact of being able to access art locally

35.   All participants agreed that the dispersed model has huge potential to benefit people and local communities.

36.   As teachers and tutors, many participants shared their first-hand experience of seeing the impact of art and art activities on the wellbeing of individuals and local communities.

37.   Many participants spoke of the wider benefits to other services too, for example social care and health services.

38.   All participants agreed that the dispersed model offered far-reaching opportunities within the education sector. For example, one participant spoke of lack of resources in schools, having to always take materials and basic resources with her to school workshops. The participant hoped the dispersed model would offer new, exciting opportunities for partnerships between the network galleries and local schools, which would create and nurture an interest in young people in the national collection.

39.   Some participants spoke of the potential of the dispersed model for them as emerging artists.

> *"As an art teacher and trying to get art into all parts of the community all the time for everybody, it's going to make such a huge difference, and being able to champion that and feel proud of an institution we have developed which further connects us all and allows us to have stronger relationships with other parts of Wales … that's so necessary at the moment."*
>
> *"As a tutor … the response from people attending [recovery classes] is unbelievable and the medical opinion now is going towards the benefit of art."*
>
> *"Wales has innumerable and talented artists working in its communities. It would be great for them to have some recognition."*
>
> *"You're talking about £300 to get a bus [for a school visit] and that money is not available today … So, the idea of having [art] in our communities is a great idea … that we can open the arts world out into the community, without having to travel."*

Tourism

40. Participants mentioned that a National Contemporary Art Gallery has the potential to drive tourism and investment in local areas, across Wales.

> *"In terms of tourism I think its massive. We get people who come to holiday in west Wales and who now come just to see exhibitions … and [in terms of] ownership locally and people actually kind of being proud of Welsh art … they actually compete on the international stage, because the standard is already there."*

Welsh language

41. Many participants spoke of the opportunities the National Contemporary Art Gallery would lend to promote the awareness of the Welsh language, nationally and internationally.

Challenges of the Welsh Government plans for a National Contemporary Art Gallery

Lack of information

42. Many participants spoke of their concern about the lack of information available about the Welsh Government plans for a National Contemporary Art Gallery.

43. As artists, many participants felt that they had not been involved in the process of developing the Welsh Government plans for the contemporary art gallery.

44. Some participants raised concerns about the lack of logistical information about the Welsh Government plans, for example timescales and staffing.

"Artists feel out of the loop. To be honest, the galleries have felt out of the loop for quite a long time as well."

"More knowledge would be helpful. We're having to guess, almost hoping what this might be."

"We don't have a sense of how this will operate and who will run it."

"I'm struggling because there is a lot of unknown factors … I can see a lot of potential in it, and I hope it's a good opportunity to bring in people that are really underrepresented in art, for example disabled people, but all the other groups who need to be seen too."

Terminology

45. One participant suggested that this is not a new model, it is an already well-established model found elsewhere. However, it is not usually described as a 'gallery'. This has led to confusion and a lack of understanding of the project.

46. Some participants raised concerns about the lack of consistency in the use of terminology. For example, the anchor site is described as a flagship building and an anchor site, which are two very different ideas.

47. One participant suggested having a flagship building with its own budget and staff would give impetus to the national collection, in a way the dispersed model would not.

48. The same participant mentioned the downside to having the flagship building would probably be the relationship with the network galleries.

> *"The wording is quite confusing … the word gallery implies a physical space."*
>
> *"One thing I think is really interesting is that this Welsh model is described as the National Contemporary Art Gallery … It's simply a model of disseminating collections more effectively throughout a country."*
>
> *"There are many good things about it; it acknowledges the geography of our country, the cultural diversity of the country. But in practice, it seems to be extremely complicated and actually a rather fraught process."*

Dispersed model

49. Many participants spoke of the challenge for all venues involved to keep their own identity as individual sites, as well as being a part of the National Contemporary Art Gallery.

50. Other participants spoke of the challenge for the National Contemporary Art Gallery to have its own clear and consistent identity, so that people understand what is meant by the gallery itself.

51. Some participants mentioned the challenge of making the National Contemporary Art Gallery relevant to people in their local communities.

52. Participants suggested that it will be challenging to make sure that the project is viewed as a whole and venues should not be seen as separate 'strands.'

53. Many participants spoke of the need for a holistic approach with shared protocols for all the venues involved, i.e. the nine network galleries, the potential three hubs and the anchor site.

54. Participants mentioned the challenge of working collaboratively, ensuring that all partners are treated fairly, equally and feel included in the project.

55. Similarly, some participants spoke about their experience of the process to date and felt that it was more top down than what they had hoped.

56. Some participants spoke of the disconnect between the hubs and the nine network galleries.

57. Having attended some information sharing sessions with the Welsh Government, some participants felt that there was very little difference between existing processes and the new model being proposed, for example, when applying for a loan from the national collection.

58. As artists, many participants spoke of the challenge of embracing all forms of contemporary art within the national gallery.

> *"It has to be made to work so that everybody is working together and there's no competition between sites."*
>
> *"It is only going to be as strong as the collaboration between the anchor site and the existing sites."*
>
> *"It's all about relevance … actually making it relevant to my environment and it actually being of interest to the people around me is very, very important."*
>
> *"Acknowledging the expertise, the curatorial perspective of each of the [network galleries] and that they have their own context and locality … is not as much a part of the conversation as it should be at the moment."*
>
> *"The national centres … are they calling the tune or to what extent is it a model which actually listens to, understands, learns from and respects the expertise of the venue galleries?"*
>
> *"It's to do with mindset, Cardiff has to resist the idea that the museum is doing us a favour."*
>
> *"It will just be so dispersed that it doesn't have a central identity. That would be my worry."*

> *"It needs to be from the ground up, if it starts to feel from the top down, it's going to feel as if it's imposed on people and will become patronising."*

Anchor site

59.   Many participants mentioned the need for clarity concerning the anchor site and raised concerns about the recent development and lack information about this 'strand.'

60.   Some participants questioned the need for an anchor site suggesting it would be more beneficial to further utilise existing galleries.

61.   Other participants suggested that the anchor site should be the starting point, then being able to further direct to the network galleries across Wales.

62.   Few participants discussed the idea of having a 'family of galleries' on three sites, similar to Tate, which is a family of four sites, including St Ives, Cornwall. These could be located in north, mid and south Wales.

63.   Few participants were in favour of having one physical building for the National Contemporary Art Gallery.

> *""I would rather see investment to build up what is currently quite a precarious visual arts … rather than divert money into a big, new glossy building which may not have a clear rationale."*
>
> *""It would be lovely to have a super duper gallery, a central point. But you have to be practical. We are living in dire times at the moment."*
>
> *"Personally, it feels like a bit of a cop out to be honest … we really do need a contemporary art gallery in one building, and we need the Welsh Government to do it!"*

Private sector

64.   Few participants mentioned how the private and public sector could work in conjunction to develop and sustain a National Contemporary Art Gallery.

> *"There is an assumption all the time in the public sector, that once you set these things up they have to be government funded … but it doesn't have to be like that. [The Welsh Government] really do need to have the private sector onboard … This is a gallery that can become self-sufficient."*

Promotion

65.   Participants felt that effective promotion would be key to the success of the dispersed model; many spoke of the challenges of such promotion.

66.   Many participants spoke of the need for cafes, shops etc. to encourage people to visit the galleries as well as family activities to allow the local community to take ownership of the National Contemporary Art Gallery.

Transport and sustainability

67.   Some participants suggested it will be challenging to ensure good or even sufficient transport links between the various galleries, across Wales.

68.   Many participants mentioned the issues of transporting the national collection to venues across Wales and raised concerns about carbon footprint.

Economy

69.   In light of the current economic climate, some participants spoke of their concern about public response to the spending regarding the National Contemporary Art Gallery.

70.   Some participants raised concerns about the ongoing funding, particularly regarding staffing the venues across Wales.

71.   Participants suggested the potential of sponsorships for the National Contemporary Art Gallery.

Digital access to contemporary art

Advantages

72.   All participants agreed that digital access to contemporary art is an integral 'strand' of the Welsh Government plans for a National Contemporary Art Gallery.

73. Participants agreed that the new website, **Celf ar y Cyd**, launched in June 2023, has huge potential for the acknowledgment of contemporary art in Wales on an international level.

74. Many participants praised the quality of the digitisation on the **Celf ar y Cyd**, website.

75. As lecturers, teachers and tutors, many participants spoke of how the website would enrich and enhance many aspects of the education sector.

76. Some participants mentioned the inclusivity of digital access, particularly for people whom are not physically able to visit galleries.

77. One participant noted how digital access should not be an alternative to visiting galleries, but rather another option, especially for people not within reach of galleries.

78. Many participants suggested that digital access would be the springboard needed to encourage people to visit galleries.

79. Participants spoke about how the **Celf ar y Cyd**, website would raise awareness and introduce the Welsh language to a new audience.

> *"It is a democratic way of sharing the work and would increase its visibility."*
>
> *"… it doesn't matter where in the world you are, you can see Welsh art. In that respect, you compete with all the other major galleries, because you become that other entity."*
>
> *"Digital access is really important from a teaching and research perspective, having one centralised, standardised database with images and cataloguing information is really valuable. But it can't be just a website, it needs to be a part of the wider programme of the gallery."*
>
> *"The interactive and immersive side of digital access to contemporary art is really exciting."*
>
> *"The digital gallery is absolutely brilliant. It's a great idea."*

> *"The digital artwork could be used almost like a trojan horse to introduce the language to people who don't know about it … it does give it another perspective."*

Disadvantages

80.   Participants spoke of the challenges of digital poverty, restricting access to contemporary art.

81.   Many participants shared their concerns about digital access discouraging people to visit galleries in person.

82.   All participants suggested that the experience of accessing art physically is very different to accessing art digitally. All participants spoke of the need to be physically in the same room as the artwork in order to fully appreciate the work.

83.   Many participants spoke about the social aspect of visiting a gallery, which is lost when accessing art digitally.

84.   Participants spoke of the need to involve the artists themselves in the process of the digitisation of contemporary art.

85.   Participants mentioned the challenge of keeping the digitisation of contemporary art up to date.

86.   One participant mentioned that researchers need something less curated than a public facing digital resource and a fine balance was needed.

87.   As artists, some participants spoke of their concern about people taking ideas from their artwork.

88.   One participant mentioned the possible issue of over digitisation.

> *"We're all so au fait with sitting in front of a screen and accessing anything in the world, but to actually go into a physical space and the work in reality is a totally different experience."*
>
> *"As an artist, the painted surface is very important to me in my work and is a whole other dimension to my artwork."*