

Written Response by Huw Lewis AM, Minister for Housing, Regeneration and Heritage to the Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee Report on 'Participation in the Arts'

12 March 2013

Introduction

Increasing levels of participation and removing barriers to participation are at the heart of the Welsh Government's priorities for the arts. Increasing people's understanding of the arts and ability to access them are also founding principles of the Arts Council of Wales (ACW). I therefore fully welcome this report from the Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee Task and Finish Group.

I was particularly pleased to note that the report recognises the huge range of excellent work that is already being undertaken in increasing opportunities for individuals and organisations to participate in the arts in Wales.

Indeed, the latest information available on participation levels, far from showing a drop in numbers, has seen an increase to record levels. It is no coincidence that participation by adults has increased from 27% in 2011 to 40% in 2012, while participation levels amongst children and young people increased from 85% to 92% between 2010 and 2012.

Nevertheless, I note the Committee's concerns in respect of the continuing barriers to participation, not least issues surrounding geographical access, and the availability and cost of public transport, particularly in rural areas. The problems of access for people with disabilities and for other disadvantaged groups also come across strongly.

We must continue to try to tackle these issues. In fact, arts organisations have done a lot to address them in recent years. Hugely successful schemes like ACW's 'Night Out' have taken the arts to the people, and recently, we have seen companies like National Theatre Wales taking their productions to a wide variety of community settings, right across Wales. This has provided opportunities for people throughout Wales to have access to high quality artistic activity 'on their own doorstep'. Similarly, recent developments in ICT and digital media offer exciting new possibilities for bringing the arts to a much wider audience.

Clearly, improving accessibility to the various artforms is very important. However we should continue to encourage people to actually participate. The arts have tremendous power to inspire, and to help individuals to reach their potential. People's lives are enriched by the arts and we should strive to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to experience directly the benefits they bring.

The report suggests that still more could be done in this area but recognises the constraints on all culture budgets at present. It goes on to make a number of recommendations that suggest how this might best be dealt with. Arts organisations will need to rise to the challenge by working smarter, more collaboratively and more imaginatively if they are to continue to provide the levels of creativity and service that the public have come to expect.

I am pleased that the report recognises this important role for local government in supporting and maintaining our arts and heritage. Local authorities all over Wales are making a vital cultural contribution. In my view it is essential that investment in the arts by ACW and other national agencies is complemented by local government support. Local authorities have always made a crucial contribution toward ensuring that communities all over Wales can access and participate in cultural activities of all kinds.

Whilst I recognise the acute financial pressures, I very much hope that local authorities will continue to support this key element of their work. The work currently being undertaken to push forward the Simpson agenda will be key to this. More collaboration and sharing of services and expertise are vital to ensuring that services can be maintained. This will only work if all parties pull together and embrace new ways of working. My officials and I will do all we can to help make this happen.

I will also help to promote this collaborative approach via my regular meetings with the main arms length bodies in the culture field.

The Committee has recognised the distinction between the role of the Welsh Government and the work of the Arts Council of Wales which is reflected in the recommendations which fall to each organisation.

The Welsh Government's strategic agenda is set out in our Programme for Government, which, in relation to the arts, builds on the progress made over recent years in its commitment to work for "high quality cultural experiences to be available to all, irrespective of where they live, or their background".

Understandably, the Committee has taken a particular interest in the impact of the Arts Council of Wales Investment Review. I know that when the recommendations were announced there was some concern that the reduction in the number of ACW's core revenue clients might create large holes in our artistic landscape. It is pleasing to note that these concerns have not manifested themselves in reality. There remains some discontent amongst those individual organisations that saw their funding reduced or cut altogether, and these have been quite vocal in their opposition to change. However, the fact remains that while there were inevitably winners and losers, the arts sector as a whole is now in a stronger position to provide better access to the arts, and to encourage more participation in the arts.

As the Report identifies, my annual Remit Letter is important for ensuring the Welsh Government's priorities are clearly conveyed to the Arts Council. I can assure the Committee that for 2013/14, my Remit Letter to ACW once again emphasises the importance of promoting active participation in the arts.

Financial Implications

As I have mentioned previously, the nature of these recommendations aligns closely with current programme priorities and while some adaptation of these programmes will be required to meet the requirements of the specific recommendations, there is no need for a complete change of direction.

For this reason, I do not anticipate that the implementation of these recommendations will lead to any significant financial implications for any of the key stakeholders involved. Any additional resources required will be met from within existing Welsh Government and Arts Council of Wales budgets.

Detailed responses to the Report's recommendations are set out below:

I have set out below my response to the Report's individual recommendations:

Recommendation 1. The Welsh Government should put in place a participation action plan, to sit alongside its accessibility action plan, with the purpose of increasing participation levels across Wales. (Page 25)

Response: Accept in principle

Rationale: The link between access and participation is clear as without access to high quality arts activity there would be nothing to inspire people to participate and pursue their own ambitions to be part of a vibrant arts sector. The Committee has identified this link, and it has been highlighted in the similarity of some of the recommendations to those that came out of the previous Accessibility Inquiry.

While the Welsh Government and ACW are working to increase levels of participation, it appears that this hard work is not being fully recognised or understood by the public at large. It is important that this work is highlighted, and that it is seen to be working. I am happy to support the recommendation that an action plan is developed that will provide a focus to this work, with clear objectives, expectations of what it is intended to achieve and regular monitoring, evaluation and reporting on progress in increasing participation levels.

I must stress, however that All Welsh Government arts funding is channelled through the ACW, albeit that it works to a strategic framework that we set. In accordance with the arms-length funding principle, ACW will be the delivery body for these recommendations. Therefore I will be looking for the plan to be owned and driven forward by ACW, albeit with regular monitoring by my officials, through the regular quarterly monitoring meetings.

Recommendation 2. The action plan should include measures to monitor participation levels across the arts, and actions to identify inequality of provision (e.g. due to geographic, economic or social reasons). (Page 25)

Response: Accept

Rationale: ACW already has measures in place to monitor participation levels and to assess whether specific groups are under-represented, and these will continue to be used to monitor the action plan. ACW undertakes a number of annual surveys of attendance at and participation in arts activities across Wales. The indicators used encompass 14 arts forms, comprising Art/Craft Exhibitions, Arts Festivals, Ballet, Carnival & Street Arts, Contemporary dance, Film, Musical, Opera, Plays, Classical music, Jazz (Folk and 'Trad'), World Music, other Live music and Literary events. These surveys also analyse attendance and participation by both adults and children.

Recommendation 3. In addition to accessibility and equality, the Welsh Government's annual remit letter should include an emphasis on increasing participation levels. (Page 25)

Response: Accept

Rationale: My annual Remit Letter to the Arts Council of Wales will continue to emphasise the importance of widening access and increasing participation levels in the arts, as it has done in previous years.

This year, I have specifically highlighted the need to continue with efforts to increase participation levels, particularly in light of the difficulties caused by the current financial climate and subsequent pressure on available funding levels. Organisations are being encouraged to think imaginatively, to develop links and partnerships wherever they can, and to work closely with ACW. ACW has also been tasked with providing advice, guidance and support to organisations to help ensure that they continue to adapt and to meet the challenges they face.

Recommendation 4. The action plan should include measures to ensure co-ordination across government departments and joint working by partners, including local government and the voluntary sector. (Page 26)

Response: Accept

Rationale: I accept this recommendation as it will bring together a wide range of knowledge and different experiences. However, I would like the proposed action plan to be developed and implemented primarily by the Welsh Government and the Arts Council of Wales.

I note that your report suggests that input should be sought from voluntary groups and those responsible for supporting under-represented groups but to keep the exercise manageable, I would not want to widen involvement in the detailed work of drawing up the plan beyond the Welsh Government and ACW. This is not to say that the views of other organisations and sectors will not be fully considered. My regular Ministerial meetings with representatives of all the key cultural organisations, the third sector, etc will have a key role to play in contributing ideas to this exercise. I will also ensure that in preparing the action plan, discussion takes place with other departments to explore the role that participation in the arts can play in addressing other key agendas including education, regeneration, and Communities First.

Recommendation 5. The Arts Council of Wales should keep under review its funding policies, to ensure that they are delivering excellence, while increasing participation levels. (Page 34)

Response: Accept

Rationale: Current ACW policies and plans already stress the dual ambitions of encouraging arts activity of the highest quality, and making that activity available to the widest possible audience. Promoting participation and inclusion is a prominent priority in the Arts Council's funding strategies.

ACW will be reviewing its approach to supporting practical participation in the arts during 2013-14.

Recommendation 6. The Arts Council of Wales should ensure that organisations are able to access information on alternative sources of funding. This should be in the form of training, if necessary. (Page 34)

Response: Accept

Rationale: The Arts Council of Wales is developing a range of initiatives to help organisations with their fundraising. Through its Information Service, Council will provide information about funding sources and opportunities, and putting in place ways of alerting organisations to those opportunities. Council will also explore the feasibility of arranging funding surgeries or 'market-place' events for arts organisations to meet other trusts and foundations.

The Arts Council believes that organisations themselves are potentially the most effective fundraisers, as they are the best advocates of their own work. So the Council is looking at ways of building capability within the sector by developing new training initiatives.

Recommendation 7. The Arts Council of Wales should ensure that it uses its relationships with networks to ensure that information reaches relevant organisations. (Page 35)

Response: Accept

Rationale: The Arts Council works with a variety of networks that includes Voluntary Arts Wales, the Black Voluntary Sector Network Wales, VAGW (visual arts and galleries), Disability Arts Cymru, Age Concern, Wales Association of Performing Arts. These contacts will continue.

Recommendation 8. The Arts Council of Wales should put in place a strategy to increase levels of funding from business. (Page 35)

Response: Accept

Rationale: Fundraising from the business sector is an issue that will need to be handled with care. Experience has shown that direct approaches from the Arts Council to business are unlikely to succeed – most businesses are wary of public sector intermediaries and tend to prefer to deal with arts organisations directly.

That said, ACW recognises the importance of creating a climate within which business is aware of the benefits of investing in the arts. ACW works closely with a specialist organisation, Arts & Business Cymru, which has successfully developed relationships with most of the leading companies in Wales. It is important that ACW's future strategy does not destabilise this relationship.

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