

Letter to Ms Bethan Jenkins, Chair, Committee for Culture, Welsh Language and Communications on behalf of Cardiff Chapter of What next?

5 October 2016

Dear Ms Jenkins

We are writing to you on behalf of the Cardiff Chapter of What Next? - a UK-wide arts network. You have asked for views on the priority issues that your committee should address in the next period. We very much welcome your initiative in seeking views from the sectors relevant to the committee's work. Following a discussion at the group meeting this morning we would like to bring two issues to your attention.

Historic Wales

We understand that the Minister announced last week that he plans to move forward to create Historic Wales, bringing together the commercial activities of the four bodies in the heritage sector. While there would be clear benefits in enabling these bodies to work together to increase their commercial income - in the current climate, a necessity - there is a deep concern that this might be done in a way that would affect adversely the diversity and independence of some of our most cherished national institutions - particularly the National Museum Wales and the National Library of Wales - institutions of great historical significance to Wales.

We would point out that the National Museum and National Library, while being key guardians of our heritage, also overlap into the arts world, as we will see this month with the launch of the latest Artes Mundi exhibition. They are, thus, also promoters of debate. For that reason it is highly desirable that they should be seen to have a high degree of independence from government.

We also note the approach taken by Ministers this week in relation to local government, where collaboration has been preferred to institutional mergers that usually consume so much management time.

At present there appears to be no clarity as to what precisely is proposed, but we note that the Minister has said that his plans are in fulfilment of his party's manifesto at the Assembly elections this year. Unfortunately, the only version of the manifesto - Together Wales - that we have been able to access from public sources contains no reference at all to this commitment or to culture in general. In view of this it is all the more important that there should be adequate public debate on the issue, and scrutiny by the committee.

Local government and culture

In the current economic climate arts funding has been under severe strain. We appreciate that the Welsh Government has done what it can to mitigate the effect, but the consequence has been a halving of the portfolio of arts companies. The arts sector has had to adjust to this reality that has necessitated a concentration on preserving the core of national companies. Far less attention has been paid to the impact of local government cuts on cultural activity at the local level. In many localities this has been severe. It needs to be looked at closely if we are to get a rounded picture of total cultural provision both locally and nationally.

We sought to raise this issue with all political parties when they were compiling their manifestos for the 2016 elections. We argued that, even in a period of financial austerity, local authorities should

not be allowed to become culture blind. We thought that even where expenditure was constrained local authorities should, nevertheless, have a duty i) to act as a convener and enabler of the arts and culture within their boundaries, ii) be required to undertake audits of cultural provision in their areas and iii) to establish local cultural consortia.

It would be timely for your committee to assess the state of local cultural provision, the variety of approaches adopted and the degree of possible collaboration between authorities in the cultural field.

We would be happy to offer evidence on both of the subjects set out above,

With best wishes

What Next? Cardiff Chapter