



The role of arts and culture in addressing poverty and social exclusion – information for Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee

Brief: *Talk about your organisation's experience of tackling social exclusion through the arts and culture. In particular, we are interested in knowing what works, what doesn't work and any barriers you have encountered in your outreach work. We are particularly interested in the resources needed to make these efforts successful, both staff and funding. We would also like to know what sort of evaluation you carry out regarding your outreach work.*

Voluntary Arts Wales

Voluntary Arts Wales (VAW) is part of Voluntary Arts Network: a national charitable company established in 1991 that operates in a devolved structure throughout the UK and Republic of Ireland, promoting and championing participation in creative cultural activity in all its forms.

Note re. Fusion – Although our previous Chair sat on the Cultural Inclusion Board, Voluntary Arts Wales has not been involved in the delivery of the Fusion programme. We are supportive of the aims and partnership approach, but we are not best placed to comment on the success of Fusion. We do however welcome the opportunity to provide information to the Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee's inquiry, from our experience of working with the voluntary and amateur creative sector in Wales.

The voluntary arts, culture and heritage sector

The voluntary arts, culture and heritage 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 Walesⁱ. 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 numberⁱⁱ.

As the majority of these groups are small, local (84% of the total figure, according to WCVA statistics) and rarely in receipt of public funds – they often exist on a purely voluntary basis or charge a small membership fee – they often go under the radar of public policy, but nevertheless contribute a huge amount to the cultural and civic life of Wales, as well as helping to improve wellbeing and social connectedness, and addressing social exclusion.

For the majority of participants in voluntary creative and cultural groups, the strongest motivator for wanting to take part is the social element. In late 2018, Voluntary Arts

conducted a survey of creative participation, which generated 123 responses from Walesⁱⁱⁱ. Respondents were asked whether their creative group did any targeted work prioritising particular policy areas, and 61% of those involved in creative activity said that their group does work to support people experiencing (or at risk of) loneliness. 52% said that their work helped with education and training, and 40% reported that their work directly supported low income families. The same survey found that the main benefits of participation in creative groups were improved mental health, personal achievement and social cohesion.

There is an increasing body of evidence which demonstrates that regular participation in creative activities is particularly beneficial to health and wellbeing^{iv}, but research has also demonstrated similar benefits for skills development, often being the first step on a path to further education, training and employment.

For example, the scoping study *'The role of grassroots arts activities in communities'*^v identified the following educational impacts of participation in grassroots creative groups:

- develops learning performance in formal settings with participants demonstrating an increase in literacy, verbal and communication skills;
- leads to the development and creation of knowledge and technical skills specific to those activities and also to transferable skills in other fields and potentially employment;
- can contribute to understandings of contemporary related but tangential issues to the art form itself that emerge from discussion and debate within their specific field or arts group;
- develops an awareness of the international scope of the specific field, leading to the building of international social networks and sometimes to travel abroad, extending participants' experience of other cultures and customs;
- develops literacy skills among those who are no longer in formal learning settings;
- develops opinions and skills in argument and debate;
- develops skills in improvisation and experimentation frequently resulting in new discoveries and innovation.

For Voluntary Arts, voluntary and amateur creative groups are located within the 'cultural commons': a shared space where people convene around shared interests, and can realise their cultural potential through pooling their knowledge, skills, contacts, assets and venues. These resources and assets need to be valued and supported, if local culture is to thrive.

To take one example, the importance of appropriate and available community venues has been a recurring theme in our work. Beyond kitchen tables and bedroom desks, people need places to meet, to rehearse, to practice, to perform. We know that there is a lot of creative activity that takes place in church halls, community centres, pub function rooms and libraries.

In 2018, we surveyed the creative activity that takes place in Welsh public libraries, with responses from 19 of the 22 Local Authority areas. The survey revealed the extensive and varied benefits to individuals of the creative activities offered by libraries: improved health and wellbeing, and increased social interaction were cited as two of the main benefits.

What is particular about libraries is their accessible, community-owned nature: a common space where all are welcome, and where cost isn't a barrier to participation. Respondents said:

- “The informal setting of libraries makes access to creative arts easier.”
- “Great for providing a non-threatening social environment for people to meet.”

The reinvention of libraries over recent years has now placed them at the forefront of community creative activity, and they often act as gateways to different forms of culture.

Case study – Drawn Together Wales

In 2018, Voluntary Arts Wales collaborated with community arts organisation Coast Lines to deliver Drawn Together Wales. The project invited people to take a few moments out of their day simply to draw something they could see, in shared sketchbooks. We reached over 4,500 participants, of all ages (from 1 to 98), and from every Local Authority area of Wales. The subsequent exhibition in the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff, was seen by over 47,000 people.

We used drawing because it can act as a gateway to other forms of visual arts. Drawing is accessible, low-cost and democratic; and also foundational artistic practice for painting, printing, sculpture, architecture, fashion or industrial design. It is also an important tool for developing observational skills.

99% of participants enjoyed their experience, and 96% of participants reported feeling happier and more positive as a result of taking part. We asked if participants were creatively active, and the most common answer was ‘never’; and we asked if participants were involved in any creative or community groups, and the most frequent response was ‘no’. Despite this, in our follow-up survey, 90% of participants have said that they have continued to draw since taking part in the project.

Participants reported developing a greater appreciation of their communities, through observing their surroundings more closely through drawing. Many reported that they have developed other creative practices, joined or set up creative groups, developed confidence and become more involved in the civic life of their communities.

ⁱ *Light Springs through the Dark*, Welsh Government, 2016 <https://gov.wales/docs/drah/publications/161213-a-vision-for-culture-in-wales-en.pdf>

ⁱⁱ All Wales Database of Voluntary Organisations in Wales, WCVA, 2016 <https://www.wcva.org.uk/what-we-do/research-publications>

ⁱⁱⁱ Voluntary Arts' Big Conversation 2018 <https://www.voluntaryarts.org/News/big-conversation-2018-results/> / <https://www.voluntaryarts.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=7a517dd3-9dbe-4310-b8cc-7725efc4f640>

^{iv} See for example the summary of *Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing*, from the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing <https://www.voluntaryarts.org/creative-health-the-arts-for-health-and-wellbeing>

^v *The role of grassroots arts activities in communities: a scoping study*, Third Sector Research Centre, 2011 <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/tsrc/publications/working-papers/working-paper-68.pdf>