Communities and Culture Committee

Inquiry into the ‘accessibility of arts and cultural activities in Wales’

Response from Voluntary Arts Wales

About us
At Voluntary Arts Wales we care passionately about participation in the arts, and fundamentally believe in its importance to individuals, communities and humankind in general. When we talk about participatory arts we mean people taking an active role: doing, making and creating. Participation in the arts is at the heart of the culture of Wales. Cultural activities have a huge power to unify communities across ethnic, social, linguistic, gender and generational boundaries. We believe they are key to the regeneration of communities and the creation of an economically and socially confident Wales.

We work across the whole of Wales providing mentoring and help to groups and organisations of all sizes, that practice the full spectrum of art forms, with needs such as business planning, project development, fundraising, marketing strategies, policy creation, information dissemination, employment and recruitment issues, events management and administration. In the past seven years Voluntary Arts Wales has directly assisted more than 600 voluntary and community arts organisations ranging from small eisteddfodau to large staffed arts umbrella bodies. Our database contains contacts for more than 1600 groups across Wales. Our e-newsletter readers have increased from 850 to 1400 over the last year.

Our work is generic and across all art forms and we work in an open and inclusive way. As a result of this we work and give advice and help to older people, younger people, people in communities 1st areas, people in rural and urban areas, people with disabilities, people from other cultures, people who only work through the medium of Welsh and others. You could say we help with everything else that’s needed to run a successful group or organisation, apart from the art form.

Voluntary Arts Wales also acts as the sector’s advocate at Arts Council and Assembly level; representing the views and issues of the sector, including those whose voice is too often unheard. This representation and consultation occurs through two Assembly Advisory mechanisms – the Arts Strategy Board and the Third Sector Partnership Council. Examples of issues that we have discussed include the impact of the Olympics, licensing law, health and safety legislation, new funding mechanisms and procurement. We are also a component part of the Voluntary Cultural Sector Compact Working Group facilitated by the Arts Council of Wales and have recently helped in
revising the Compact agreement and in the development of an Arts Council of Wales Participation Strategy.

**Purpose**

We submit the following information to be considered as part of the Inquiry outlined above. The views and issues expressed throughout the document are those of Voluntary Arts Wales, a number of our clients and based on the information gathered at a sectoral event facilitated by Voluntary Arts Wales as described below.

We would ask the committee to consider the information and points raised within the paper. Additionally we would urge the committee to support the resulting recommendations put forward. We look forward to the outcomes of your final report in Spring 2011.

**Background**

**1 Definitions**

1.1 Arts participation refers to people taking an active role; doing, making and creating, rather than the passive experience gained as an audience member. Participation in the arts:

- Is an empowering process which engages the whole of the nation
- Promotes a healthier, wealthier, better educated and more integrated Wales
- Is primarily a voluntary activity, motivated by personal enquiry rather than policy or profit

A Position Statement on “Participation in the Arts” has been drawn up by the Voluntary Sector Compact working group, which consists of representatives from the Arts Council of Wales and the voluntary and community arts sectors. It is included below for reference as it has been signed up to by all parties and is recognised as a guiding statement for the arts sector:

*The Arts Council of Wales and the Voluntary Cultural Sector share the belief that people of all ages, abilities and cultures, wherever they live in Wales, have the right to define, create, and actively participate in the arts activities of their choice.*

‘*Everyone has the right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts*’
Article 27 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights'

Participation in the Arts is a primary mechanism for experiencing this cultural right and offers an inclusive and essentially different experience from the consumption of the culture produced by others.

The Arts Council of Wales and the Voluntary Cultural Sector believe that participation in the arts is an empowering creative process that engages, educates and promotes a healthy nation.

The Arts Council of Wales and the Voluntary Cultural Sector recognise that, in partnership with others, they have a duty to broaden the public access and increase opportunities for practical participation in the arts throughout Wales and in so doing provide a pathway for enjoyment, personal development, well-being, community cohesion and the enrichment of local and national culture.

ACW/VSC Compact Working Group - June 07

Opportunities for arts participation fall into a number of categories – these groupings and the organisations offering the opportunities work in a variety of ways, but are often interrelated.

Voluntary Arts

This can be described as the practice of the arts by people working and learning together on a regular basis and, but not necessarily, performing/exhibiting locally. Voluntary arts encompass amateur arts, youth arts, traditional arts and the arts activity of cultural, religious and local community groups. Opportunities for arts participation are also offered by a wide range of private organizations and individuals, including private dance schools, music tutors, etc.

There are also a wealth and breadth of participatory arts, which are intrinsic to people’s lives and have not in the past been included in formal strategic planning, e.g. opportunities offered by Women’s Institutes, Merched y Wawr, Young Farmers, Youth Clubs; many of which bring a unique Welsh perspective to the arts.

Community Arts

Community arts practice involves community arts professionals creating opportunities within communities for people to develop skills and to explore and develop ideas through active participation in the arts. Community arts practice often targets disadvantaged communities. By its nature it should be
transformational and can be an important cultural tool in terms of support of long term community regeneration goals.

**Arts education and outreach activities**

Young people are possibly the largest sector of the community to be involved in participatory arts activities, as participation in dance, music and the visual arts is compulsory during the primary school years. Many schools offer additional out of hours activities to pupils which include the arts and many pupils will have engaged at some time in an “artists in school” participatory activity.

Many arts venues and producing companies are committed to supporting practical participation initiatives, often described as education or outreach activities. These activities are often led by arts professionals and relate to the work of a specific company or tour.

**Local government and other public bodies**

Departments of local government and other public bodies also encourage participatory arts activity. These can include community education, social services, health bodies, etc.

The work therefore of the voluntary and community arts in Wales ranges from professionally led work in community development contexts to volunteer run choirs and amateur groups. This is a significant sector delivering at grass roots level across the whole of Wales and making huge contributions to the Welsh Assembly Government’s targets, by increasing confidence, skill levels and engagement of people as well as benefits which are community enhancing and contribute to community cohesion.

However, the infrastructure which delivers that engagement is fragile and potentially more vulnerable than any other sector within the arts. One reason for this is its reliance on lottery funding; another could be seen to be the lack of a co-ordinated strategy for development and delivery.

1.2 In view of the many forms of arts participation laid out above, access to the arts should not therefore be viewed simply as the opportunity for example to attend a local arts or cultural venue. If this were the case it would be easy to address access by just ensuring there were enough venues of this type at regular intervals across the whole of Wales. Access should be described more holistically and reflect the imperative to supply a whole range of arts experiences, which address the varying and diverse access issues of different people and groups within society. These range from ensuring disability access issues are catered for; to language & cultural & gender access issues; to access issues related to people who feel unable to
engage with formal centres of arts activity, due to severe lack of confidence and lack of knowledge of how to engage with these mechanisms.

2 “A Piece of Your Mind” – sectoral event

On Thursday 9th September 2010 Voluntary Arts Wales (VAW) convened a half day event to gather the views of the voluntary and amateur arts sector to contribute towards this submission. The meeting was attended by 36 people representing 24 arts organisations (including 2 local authorities).

The primary concern of those attending the event was the impact of the Arts Council of Wales (ACW) recent Investment Review. VAW is, ironically, one of the 32 organisations who have had the funding withdrawn from 1 April 2011.

The evidence collected has been categorised by the terms of reference for the Culture and Communities Committee Inquiry.

The Terms of Reference as extracted from the Call for Evidence
- Interconnectivity of services
- ACW Investment Review
- Budget cuts – knock on effects
- Geography – gaps created; empty buildings
- Demography
- Local Authority Role

The concerns of the event are:

Introductory Comments/Observations
The way that the terms of reference are phrased reflects confusion between spaces and experiences. What does the Committee mean by access, equality and diversity? The language used does not reflect the creativity and the diversity of arts provision currently available in Wales. Participation is more than passively attending a performance in a venue. There seems to be an over emphasis on venues, when ensuring access to the arts is more reliant on organisations and projects that are well connected and working in relevant ways in their communities.

“The local economic and social impact of the arts needs to be considered and valued. The arts improve attractiveness and the cultural impact of the arts across Wales reflects Welshness – this is not reflected in the way the terms of reference are drafted”.

Many people felt the questions in the Inquiry related to the Omnibus survey were irrelevant in the bigger scheme of things and the current environment. Most people make the correct assumption for example that slightly more women than men attend arts activities. This isn’t seen as a problem or
something that needs to be addressed but simply as the way it is. The Omnibus is based on a random sample of 1000 people, which is doubted to give robust data. Some local authorities explained that counties in Wales and the many differences between the way the arts and cultural sector works within them, cannot be reflected by this sort of survey. Also that measures that may be developed based on the outcome of the survey to e.g. increase participation of a certain age group, would not work in the same way across all counties of Wales.

Interconnectivity of services
Until we understand what is being lost i.e. the arts infrastructure, it is difficult to understand the impact of breaking the interconnectedness. There is a need to interrogate crossovers between heritage, arts, culture, libraries and the impact on the social, economic and cultural identity of communities.

Just within the arts sphere there is interconnectedness between a range of organisations in various guises; sometimes shared assets; partnership project delivery; developmental pathways. The arts sector in Wales is fluid and organic, with many blurring of boundaries and various parts interconnecting in an array of different ways which are mutually supportive. For example voluntary and community arts activities are not only a breeding ground for the professional arts” and creative industries, but actually create employment opportunities that support professional artists. The impact of cutting funds to one organisation therefore could have a whole array of other negative ramifications. “Our major fear is not just for our individual organisations but for the loss of the infrastructure”; “Concern is about the loss of provision not just about individual jobs”.

The Inquiry needs to consider potential breaches of other WAG commitments in One Wales and other strategies - in particular in relation to the impact of the ACW Investment Review.

ACW Investment Review
“There is still a lot of numb shock as well as deep anger in many people”.

“People feel nervous about this consultation and some of those that have maintained Revenue Funded Organisation (RFO) status felt nervous of attending this event in case it would jeopardise any further funding opportunities”.

Understandably the participants in the VAW event were concerned primarily about the impact of the ACW Investment Review.

Summary of key issues
1. The ACW process
2. The alternative sources of funding both the flexible funding from ACW and other sources including local authorities.
3. The transition process for organisations from whom support is being withdrawn. How will this work in practice?

4. Survival opportunities for organisations in transition

5. Lack of understanding and expertise within and across ACW. The function should not be taken into the Assembly but ACW is not considered fit for purpose currently.

In spite of the ACW consulting on every step of the process leading up to the Investment Review the overall feeling was one of isolation and powerlessness. Participants felt that the process had been designed to inform and enable but the reality was one of being swamped with information and feeling disabled. This can be evidenced by the diminishing number of organisations engaging in the consultation process on documents related to the review as time progressed. (Just two organisations commented on the final consultation document circulated). Organisations felt the process had been time consuming and had put real strain on continuing to carry out their everyday work. A number of organisations expressed a more cynical viewpoint, suggesting that the review had been a well choreographed process and a gradual stealth like process.

Even the organisations who had been allocated a place in the new portfolio felt great concern, as at this point they have no indication of the level of financial support to be expected. The sector feels great uncertainty and that ACW’s expectations of small organisations are (unrealistically) high. “RFO’s who have been kept in the portfolio have been told they will probably have to revisit their business plans, particularly in terms of budget forecasts – when are we going to be able to get some actual work done?”

The majority of attendees felt they had received mixed messages from ACW within their business plan assessment documents. The submissions were judged by various teams and the process went through many stages where input was given by multiple people. This resulted in some inconsistency both within individual assessment reports and between the reports of organisations. “It’s obvious now that ACW’s criteria were anything but constant, even when dealing with clients in the same sector.”

Some said they were extremely disappointed that having spent so long on creating the business plans, once submitted there was no dialogue whatsoever with ACW – although organisations were told at the outset there would not be a chance to present their ideas in person, there were no further discussions that followed for clarification either.

Many commented that they had been criticised for being overly ambitious, when the guidance documentation for submitting to the review asked organisations to “excite us, inspire us, surprise us!”
The whole assessment process was carried out internally by the ACW and organisations felt that there was a lack of specialist knowledge in house to enable them to do this efficiently; both in terms of a real understanding of the whole sector and its component parts but also in terms of robust business related skills. “I’m not confident that all members of the ACW’s teams were qualified to be assessing Business Plans”.

There were comments that at the outset of the process ACW had talked of drawing on external expertise and advisers, but in reality this hadn’t happened. Local authority arts officers have commented also that although ACW gave an undertaking to consult regarding organisations which they jointly fund, this hadn’t happened. Whether there were discussions at a higher level in the local authorities we are uncertain, but whatever the case, the council officers who know the organisations and how they interconnect with other organisations and their communities on the ground, seem to have been excluded from the discussions. With regard to umbrella and service provider organisations which don’t create arts products, again no external advice on assessing the quality of services appears to have been sought.

Further to the criticism of the review process, a number of organisations complained that in terms of routine monitoring, no arts council officers had ever been to see their work or activities. “ACW have to be pushed to put robust, independent monitoring systems in place, when making decisions on companies’ future”. Some of the 32 organisations who had had their funding cut complained that in routine quality assessments carried out by ACW, they had received excellent or good levels. This would seem strange when ACW said at the outset of the process that the assessment would be a level playing field for everyone with artistic quality as the most important criteria. In reality the outcomes of the review do not seem to reflect this. For example VAW itself was told that it had been excluded from the new portfolio not because of quality issues, but as a result of a strategic decision to prioritise front line delivery and the community arts sector as opposed to umbrella organisations, service providers and the voluntary/amateur parts of the sector. This leads sceptics to feel that the strategic decisions had already been made and that the process was merely a paper exercise.

There were a number of concerns expressed around funding.

Many organisations were worried about the transition period and uncertain about the ACW transition funding and the meaning of ACW flexible funding.

Organisations who have been working in the sector for years believe they have tried and tested means for delivering their work in the community. They feel though that in bidding for funding to the ACW there is an obsession with the need to incorporate additionality and newness, which completely ignores sustainability; tried and tested. “Look at the impact of taking away the Music Development Fund and the drop in quality.”
“There is an over emphasis on investment in the venue base at the expense of the production base. But venues are hard hit too”.

“Spot funding for projects is not inclusive”.

There were concerns that potential cuts in the ACW operational team should not impact disproportionately on the different regions in Wales.

There was some criticism regarding ACW having failed to raise the profile of the arts as central to Welsh culture and also regarding their progress on Foundation for the Arts, engaging properly with the Heritage lottery and accessing significant European funding to create a pot for small organisations to bid to.

**Voluntary Arts Wales Position Statement**

Voluntary Arts Wales is very disappointed to learn that it will no longer be included in the Arts Council of Wales revenue funded portfolio from next year. We are equally concerned that most of the other bodies that support small amateur/voluntary arts groups across Wales have also been excluded from the new portfolio.

The Arts Council of Wales has been very clear in explaining its decision to concentrate funds on ‘front line’ delivery (those whose core activity is the direct creation, promotion or presentation of the arts), rather than the activities of agency, umbrella and service organisations. We realise that this is a deliberate strategic decision, but we believe it is a mistake. We believe that, in these particularly challenging times for many small groups in communities across Wales, it would be more appropriate to focus public funding for the arts on strengthening and consolidating these groups, through providing enhanced infrastructure support. These groups and organisations are the lifeblood of many areas and key to ensuring community cohesion and active citizenship, whilst also providing the roots from which many professional artists and creative businesses grow.

We extend our congratulations to those organisations that have made it through and encourage those who have not to contact us to discuss anything we can do to help at this difficult time. Voluntary Arts Wales will continue to act as the voice of small grassroots groups at policy level and also to ensure that they are involved in consultation on relevant issues. However we have grave concerns about the amount of support that will be withdrawn from this part of the sector as a result of the cuts.
**Budget cuts – knock on effects**
The ACW decisions have many unintended consequences that have not yet been thought through. Coupled together with current and forthcoming public spending cuts, there are a number of disturbing knock on effects.

In some cases local authorities are withdrawing support on the back of the ACW withdrawal of funding. Local authorities are not in a position, or in many cases interested, in picking up the shortfall in funding. In bids to be submitted in September to the ACW lottery scheme requiring local authority support and match funding, the current funding scenario could jeopardise their success.

As expected alternative sources of income are diminishing, whilst in view of the cuts, attracting much more competition. There is an increased demand for example for funding from charitable trusts. As we heard from organisations that contribute to the Gwanwyn Festival, it is feared that in this case scenario it will be the smallest organisations, festivals and groups that will lose out. They feel it will be impossible to compete with larger organisation that have more resources to fundraise, when there are very limited funds available. We have also heard from small festivals which feel the same way and fear that the new Festivals Fund to be created by the ACW will be swallowed up by the “big boys”.

Organisations that have had their funding cut have been put in the position of having to try and develop enough projects, where a percentage can be taken into core costs for central support staff and functions. In some cases this is impossible as the amount of project work necessary to replace the lost core funding would be unattainable. Running projects without core funding is unsustainable.

How will ACW deal with the capital investment in buildings where the organisations are being wound up? There are examples of buildings/venues in Wales that have had substantial funding ploughed into them by ACW in recent years. However as a result of the investment review the organisations that inhabit or use them have had their funding cut. Therefore buildings may be left empty if these organisations are unable to find an alternative way forward. It does not seem sound business sense to invest heavily in a particular venue or geographical area over recent years and then suddenly to undermine that investment.

There has been some criticism of the fact that in making changes the ACW have not really taken on board how producing companies work. In some cases the ACW are removing funds from core development work, whilst supporting the development of international work or touring. The core work feeds the other work; they are not mutually exclusive.

“No investment in risk and innovation will result in stagnation and decline in quality”.

Progression routes for new artists who are undergoing training have been broken as there are a smaller number of jobs available following the ACW cuts.

The sector is feared to be at risk of going backwards. There was talk of the cuts dismantling the infrastructure, which would result in loss of the knowledge base, experience and expertise. “The value of our work is invisible often and hidden”. This waste of the expertise built up over years of practice could lead to starting from scratch. “Cultural sensitivity can’t be trained overnight”. For example the very local knowledge of the best ways to deliver community projects particularly in specific rural areas.

No one has looked at the totality of the cuts and the knock on effects on culture and communities. As a result of the cuts there will be less social inclusion work. For example the Bridgend People First Healthy Sounds scheme funds a choir for people with learning disabilities - who will do this now? “Community provision that has developed over years with community ownership and contribution will go”. The resulting impact on the people of Wales will be more mental health and social problems. “Arts are the cement in society”.

Theatre in Education as a sector has activity figures and employment figures that demonstrate the impact of this area of work. Now that three of these organisations have had their funding cut, there will be huge gaps in the South East and Powys, therefore inequality in the removal of opportunity for school children in these areas to engage with high quality drama productions. Who will fill the gaps in schools? There is a great fear that low quality, cheap productions will be bought in from elsewhere.

As a result of the removal of funding from a number of umbrella bodies that support and represent a huge number of small arts groups across Wales, reaching and consulting with the voluntary cultural sector will now be much more difficult. In terms of the One Wales and Third Dimension commitments to further and develop engagement with more citizens across the communities of Wales, this would seem the wrong step to take. Rather than developing more effective consultation mechanisms it will close them down. Organisations expressed concern that increased use of volunteers to try and maintain provision would give ACW/WAG an invitation to cut further. Despite the Coalition Government’s policy proposal, ‘the Big Society’, the use of volunteers is not sustainable long term without support for training and development. The support structures and resources required to support volunteers adequately require substantial investment.

**Geography – gaps created; empty buildings**

There are geographical gaps in terms of the existing arts provision. The impact of the move from old to new provision (as dictated by the ACW Investment Review decisions), is likely to create further gaps in provision.
especially in Powys and Monmouthshire. During the investment review process concerns were raised by a number of umbrella bodies that when looking at the criteria on which the decisions would be based, geographic provision issues should be considered; especially in rural areas, where arts activities and events are further apart and travel is difficult. It was agreed this criteria would be considered but quality of product would be the first consideration. The resulting cuts do not reflect geographic provision consideration. “The impact in Powys demonstrates that the ACW decisions have not considered the geographical element to the funding of organisations”.

There is particular concern that, as a result of not funding Theatr Powys, children and young people will be denied access to arts experiences. The company has recently moved into a purpose built theatre and office premises – how will this be used when there is no organisation to utilise the space? Welsh medium school children are disadvantaged by the cuts especially in Powys.

Centralisation of provision for example to the National Library is not accessible for people across Wales. Whenever studies are carried out into barriers to participation, transport and location always come out high on the list. Especially in rural areas, lack of adequate public transport is prohibitive of people trying to access arts activities unless they are close to home. In ensuring access for people who have confidence issues, arts provision should be available in their local community where they feel more comfortable and able to participate.

Demography
“The BME community have felt ignored and excluded from the process of the investment review (and the outcome)”. The BME community feels it currently has a low starting base, in terms of involvement and support related to cultural policy and that their sector needs to be protected and nurtured. “Storytelling and international projects feel completely isolated already”.

The rurality of many parts of Wales results in isolation especially for disabled artists. The cost of accessibility needs to be accepted and fully funded in to the provision of all buildings and services.

“Did the ACW do a Gender Equality Assessment?” The uptake of arts activity in rural areas, that are harder hit by the ACW Investment Review decisions, is higher amongst women. The impact of the ACW decisions is greater on women especially in the rural areas of Powys and Monmouth.

Local Authority Role
There is an implicit assumption that local authorities are able to take on a wider responsibility but this is not the case across all of Wales (£1 billion of cuts across local authorities in Wales in the next 4 years). This approach
risks access to arts provision regressing by years if it is not closely examined to test the reliability of this hypothesis. Local authorities told us, as did the sector, that they were concerned in view of the cuts they had to make, about being able to match fund ACW lottery bids, let alone bale companies out.

As mentioned previously, local authorities also thought the Inquiry focussed too heavily on arts and cultural venues; when there are many other forms of delivering exciting artistic opportunities and experiences. A number of officers who work in rural areas said the emphasis should be on supporting the smaller organisations and companies that travel from community to community or activities like community festivals embedded within specific communities. Community festivals are probably one of the best ways to engage with a variety of different people and groups in a particular community – they are particularly unthreatening and allow people with little confidence or experience of the arts and culture to take part.

Where does the policy of the Cultural Duty being championed by the Heritage Minister fit into this debate?

**Summary/Recommendations**
The participatory arts in Wales are widely hailed as a world leading example. Our community arts groups have been feted by the British Council and amateur theatre groups and folk dancers from across Wales travel the world as effective ambassadors for Welsh culture. This success seems to be because of our particular way of doing things in Wales – often developing artistic and cultural work organically, working in partnership with others and embedding work within the community. The interconnectedness of the sector in Wales is paramount because of this. That is why the result of the removal of funding from effectively a third of the revenue funded clients, will have a much greater impact than what first seems apparent.

We recommend therefore that:

- There is an assessment undertaken of the total impact of the cuts in each local authority area; including geographical data and within the context of the spatial plan.
- There is a baseline mapping exercise carried out in each local authority area of all participatory arts opportunities available (the ACW collate arts participation figures for Wales, but this is only based on their funded clients, therefore discounts the majority of activity that actually takes place).
- Following these two processes, discovered weaknesses in terms of access to arts participation need to be addressed – including issues related to transport and childcare.
- As well as bringing people to the arts, there is an increased emphasis on bringing the arts to the people – especially in an attempt to reach
people who don’t know how to engage with the arts through the usual mechanisms.

- Schools across Wales be fully utilised at other times to increase very local opportunities to participate in the arts.
- Amateur/voluntary sector organisations’ status be reinstated (they have been deprioritised in the ACW’s vision document “Imagine” and the Draft Participation Strategy), as it is through these organisations and groups that most of the arts participation in Wales takes place; therefore contributing significantly to One Wales and the Third Dimension.
- Infrastructure bodies that support the sector be reinstated in order to ensure the continuing interconnectedness of the sector as well as ensuring support and development for small organisations and groups, in terms of complying with necessary legislation, encouraging diversity, training, etc.
- As volunteering may become much more relevant in the current climate in terms of maintaining access to arts activities, that volunteers are supported appropriately and with sufficient resources.
- During the ACW’s internal process of cost cutting, a full operational review is undertaken.

(The majority of organisations at the Piece of Your Mind event were still in favour of an arms’ length arts funding system; but felt neither WAG nor Local Authorities could do this and that the ACW was not fit for purpose - not in tune with the realities/complexities of community arts work, working with volunteers, the impossibilities of alternative/partnership funding)

- Support and resources (including training) be given to local authorities where there are no arts development officers or very low numbers. This would ensure more parity across Wales and the capacity to engage better with the arts providers in their counties.
- Funding for grass roots arts participation should be ring fenced from the ACW’s budget and given to local authority arts development departments to distribute – being the most likely body to know about what works and what is going on in their area.

Ends......