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

September 2010
INTRODUCTION

1. The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) represents the 22 local authorities in Wales, and the three national park authorities, the three fire and rescue authorities, and four police authorities are associate members.

2. It seeks to provide representation to local authorities within an emerging policy framework that satisfies the key priorities of our members and delivers a broad range of services that add value to Welsh Local Government and the communities they serve.

3. The WLGA is pleased to be provided with the opportunity to respond to this inquiry into the accessibility of arts and cultural activities in Wales.

4. Wales has a long history of community participation and activity in arts and culture. Communities are always changing, and with patterns of in-migration, and the resulting interchanging of cultures, the arts and cultural activities and experiences have a role to play in helping to share understanding and promote tolerance of cultural differences.

5. We are also a bilingual country, and cultural activities can play an important role in challenging our perceptions of, and conveying our cultural identity in Wales and on the international stage. Welsh art and artists, cultural activities, venues and attractions can also attract tourism to Wales, particularly those in search of a unique and quality cultural experience.

Local authority arts services

6. Local authorities deliver arts provision locally as a discretionary service. The provision can therefore vary from area to area, but all services aim to provide citizens with diverse, quality opportunities to participate in arts activities, develop artistic and cultural skills, and to experience and enjoy a range of art and cultural events locally. A lot of local authority arts provision focuses on working with disadvantaged communities and within certain policy areas such as youth arts and disability arts to ensure that cultural experiences are available to all.
7. It is estimated that across Wales, total expenditure on the arts by all local authorities in 2008/09 was approximately £35.7m. In the main, a local authority arts service is likely to encompass some or all of the following:

- arts venues e.g. theatres, concert halls, galleries. These are usually directly managed, although some are contracted out to trusts/community organisations. Venues will be responsible for: programming, venue staff, building maintenance, promotion and marketing and audience development.

- direct arts services e.g. festivals, artists, activities, events, arts organisations

- central services e.g. arts development officers and administrative support for provision and administration of grants for local arts organisations and individuals

8. Local authority arts services contribute greatly to the cross cutting agenda: On average, 27% of arts service spend supports children and young people’s services and education whilst 23% of arts service spend contributes to the development of community wellbeing, exclusion and promoting equality.

9. 91% of all local authority spend on the arts is revenue expenditure. According to the ACW expenditure survey, in 2008/09, Welsh local authorities spend on arts services was £11.05 per head of the population. This differs from the nalgao spending survey for the same period which estimated that total local authority arts spend across England and Wales equates to £2.22 per head of population. This suggests that Welsh local authorities spend significantly more than their English counterparts on the arts.

**Public Libraries, Museums and Archives**

10. Libraries are hubs of the community. There are more visitors to libraries in Wales than to football matches, theatres or cinemas, put together! Libraries are public spaces where people can borrow books, music and films, search the internet, find out information, acquire skills and qualifications or participate in events.

11. Latest figures show that around 14 million visits were made to Welsh public libraries in 2008/09, which equates to almost 6 visits per person and is an increase of 3.7% on the previous 12-month period. The figures, released by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy, also show that Wales is the only country in the UK to show an increase in the number of visits per 1,000 of the population.
12. The number of books lent by Welsh public libraries went up by 6.8% to 14.45m compared to an increase of 0.6% in England, 1.7% in Scotland and 3.6% in Northern Ireland.

13. All public libraries in Wales deliver the following entitlements to their citizens:
   - Free to join
   - Free reservation of requests for books within Wales
   - Borrow anywhere, return anywhere in Wales
   - No overdue charges for children
   - Free use of the Internet and computers
   - Free use of online information resources
   - Friendly staff on hand to help

14. There are 13 local authority archive services covering the whole of Wales. Local authority archive services preserve important documents, photographs, films and sound recordings relating to their local area and make them accessible to the public. These can include records of local authorities, local businesses and estates, churches and chapels, schools and societies. Local authority archive services are legally responsible to look after their records, and are charged by local government acts to ‘make proper arrangements’.

15. Museums play an important part in preserving local history and sharing the stories of our past with our communities and visitors alike. There are 55 local authority owned museums in Wales. Local authorities have a crucial role to play in the development of museum services with 17 of the 22 authorities in Wales directly running museums and 3 providing support for independent museums within the Authority.

CONSULTATION RESPONSE

Welsh Assembly Government Strategy

16. The WLGA believes that the Welsh Assembly Government is successfully providing a range of cultural experiences which are varied and of a consistently high quality. Many of these services are delivered by the Arts Council of Wales, CyMAL or Cadw in partnership with local authorities or with local authority support.

17. It is important to aim to achieve cultural experiences ‘for all’ but this cannot be achieved by only providing ‘popular’ and ‘fashionable’ arts and cultural experiences
that will please the most possible number of people at a given time. Organisations involved in providing arts and cultural experiences aim to broaden horizons and provide a wide variety of provision, which will sometimes only be relevant to small sections of society. However, the sum of all the cultural experiences and activities being offered should provide a very wide range of options.

18. The provision of arts services is delivered mainly via the Arts Council of Wales and by local authorities directly. Resources are distributed across Wales, and respond well to local needs. Many national organisations work with communities at a local level, through their community and outreach programmes, as well as on a regional/national basis.

19. There is certainly a major challenge for the big, ‘national’ companies and organisations to redefine more explicitly their national obligation as ‘all Wales’. Outreach work, touring, educational programmes and lending people and resources are all important to strengthening links with communities across Wales – even more so at a time when money is scarce.

20. Library, museum and archive services are delivered via CyMAL and directly through local authority provision in the main. Again, there is a good working relationship between CyMAL and the local authorities, with significant improvements in recent years as a result of the very successful ‘Libraries for Life’ programme, particularly in relation to library standards, the library entitlements, the capital funding programme for library refurbishments and a well-executed marketing strategy. All this has resulted in improvements in the provision available; more consistency in key provision across Wales and an increase in user numbers (bucking the UK trend of decline).

21. The recently launched, first ever Museum Strategy for Wales is also a detailed and realistic document aimed at improving the provision in Wales, during a time of tight economic constraints. The policy of free access to national museums across Wales and to key CADW sites has also resulted in increased visitor numbers. CyMAL grants to museums and archives have improved facilities, displays and assisted specialist activities.

22. Local authorities are also responsible for a number of historic buildings and tourism attractions which can also provide cultural experiences to Welsh citizens and visitors alike. There are fantastic opportunities to make more of cultural tourism opportunities in Wales. The Cultural Tourism Partnership, of which the WLGA is a member, is
playing an important part in bringing key players within the arts, heritage and tourism sectors in Wales together to work collaboratively. The recently launched ‘People’s Collection’ is a prime example of what can be achieved when this is done successfully.

**Arts and cultural venues in Wales**

23. The consultation document queries how arts and cultural venues promote access, attract new audiences and encourage participation. This covers three very different issues across a number of cultural services which would all have different approaches.

24. By looking specifically at local authority arts services improving access for participants and audiences is approached in a number of ways including ticketing offers; specific and targeted programming; local consultation and a number of different marketing techniques. The WLGA is aware that individual authorities and service areas will provide more detail and many more practical examples of how this is done locally in their responses to this inquiry.

25. It is important recognise that these issues of promoting access, attracting audiences and encouraging participation should not be the responsibility of venues alone. Improving participation rates and access to the arts can be achieved without any link to a specific venue.

26. The WLGA believes that there is a relatively balanced picture across Wales in terms of access to reasonably priced or free cultural provision within a reasonable reach of the vast majority of the population. This provision will become increasingly under threat over the coming years, and the concern is that a decrease in funding will result in cultural provision becoming available only to those who can afford to buy it and can travel further for cultural experiences. Local authorities are doing all they can to ensure that front line services are sustained as much as possible during these difficult economic times.

27. In terms of participation in the arts, the WLGA believes that providing high quality participatory opportunities is an important priority. Local authorities can have an important role to play here, and are often best placed for the necessary ‘quality control’ as they have a sound knowledge of local artists, tutors and cultural provision across the art forms. Local authorities can also appoint tutors, organise events, develop career routes and provide support or work for local cultural businesses. Local authority arts services often have a good regional overview and are aware of where
there are gaps in provision or where links can be made between similar cultural organisations or individuals.

28. 43% of Welsh local authority arts funding is for venues. The Arts Council provides grant aid to most arts venues directly managed by Welsh local authorities. In 2008/09 ACW grant funding provided just under £3m towards the revenue costs of local authority run arts venues (13.4% of all venue income).

29. Although arts and cultural venues are important and necessary, it is important not to focus too much or target all investment on bricks and mortar. If too much emphasis is placed on the venues themselves, then other cultural infrastructure can be under-appreciated or even under-resourced as a result. It is just as important to invest in generating new cultural products, developing cultural practitioners, training staff, programming, and arranging festivals and events to attract new and old audiences alike.

30. Arts and cultural activities can take place in places other than theatres, galleries and arts centres. School halls, village halls, leisure centres, even out on the street can all be suitable locations. Participation in arts activity does not always need venues. There is also research to suggest that people are willing to travel to arts venues. For example, Cardiff has a reach which includes many valley authorities. It must also be remembered that people do not live and work within the geographical boundaries of local authorities and will often travel to venues in neighbouring authorities to participate or experience arts and cultural provision.

31. The public library network reaches all parts of Wales. The Welsh Assembly Government’s ‘Libraries for life’ programme is effectively revitalising the service through its capital refurbishment programme. The Welsh Public Library Standards have chartered these improvements over the last 7 years.

32. With library and archive services, there is obviously a need for a specific venue to hold the book stock or the public documents, but again there are developments such as ordering online, postal facilities, research services and mobile services which work with venues, particularly in more rural areas, to provide a service for all.

33. The clear strategic focus for the future, in particular at a time when capital funding will be scarce should be mainly on developing activities and opportunities to attract new audiences by breaking down barriers such as transport, perception or static provision.
Arts Council’s Investment Review

34. The WLGA acknowledges that the investment review was a difficult process for the Arts Council to undertake. We feel that it was well-managed, with constant communication throughout the process and a clear rationale provided for the decisions made. Unfortunately the Arts Council of Wales had to make a number of difficult strategic decisions and prioritise resources at a time when there is less funding available.

35. The WLGA also realises and acknowledges that decisions not to provide direct revenue funding for some organisations was not a reflection on the quality of their provision in any way, but a result of strategic prioritisation, particularly in trying to ensure that frontline delivery of arts provision could continue.

36. The Arts Council of Wales will be looking strategically at youth provision and community arts provision over the coming months. This is welcomed by the WLGA and we will be looking forward to working closely with the Arts Council as the new approach is being developed.

37. If there is a reduction in the Arts Council’s budget in future, then inevitably this will have an impact on the availability and accessibility of cultural activities in Wales. Similarly, any reductions to other budgets such as CyMAL, CADW and local authorities themselves will have the same negative effect. However, until the financial situation facing organisations for the future becomes clear, it is very difficult to assess what the impact may be.

38. Local authorities are already beginning to see the knock-on impact of the Arts Council’s investment review decisions. Increasingly, organisations that were previously funded as Arts Council revenue clients are turning to local authorities in an attempt to plug the shortfall in their funding. Unfortunately, with local authorities under severe budgetary pressures themselves, they are not in a position to step in and provide the necessary revenue support.

39. In the medium term, how the Arts Council of Wales redefines its eligibility criteria for future lottery support will key. This process will also need to recognise that previous percentage levels of contributions from applicants and other funding sources may now be impractical or unrealistic.
40. There are very few alternative funding streams available to cultural organisations. Put simply, it is not about doing ‘more with less’ any more, but about doing ‘less with less’. The main challenge is to protect as many cultural activities and venues as possible by working collaboratively and searching for innovative solutions to lack of funding where possible.

41. For local authorities, we believe that community provision must be seen as a priority as it is imperative that as many people as possible have access to arts and cultural experiences. Similarly, providing opportunities for children and young people to experience a variety of cultural provision both within and outside formal curriculum must be seen as a priority.

Local authority cultural services and activities

42. It is a very challenging time for local government in the current economic climate. Local government is working on the Welsh Assembly Government’s own spending assumptions and is currently planning for 3% cuts in revenue funding. These cash reductions equate to cuts of around 25% in real terms funding over the 4 year period.

43. Local authority cultural services are mainly discretionary and are therefore likely to come under increasing financial pressure over the coming years. It is going to prove very difficult to sustain the current level of service when there are significant funding cuts in the pipeline, particularly when education, secondary care and One Wales commitments are likely to be afforded some protection from the cuts.

44. Many local authorities are already looking for at least a 10% reduction in their budget for cultural services for 2011/12 alone. Cultural services – arts, archives, libraries, museums – have a very small team of core staff and will find it a struggle to maintain services. The main focus is on trying to maintain basic functions and to keep as many cultural venues open, and ride out the storm ahead over the next five years.

45. Local authorities do not have adequate funding available to them to fund their cultural services fully. Many are already working collaboratively on a regional or sub regional basis to try and make the necessary efficiencies and to maximise the resources available.
46. It is not easy to clearly measure the breadth of cultural provision and activity provided by a local authority. Cultural provision does not always fit neatly into clearly defined silos, and is not always even directly funded or provided by the arts service itself. Cultural provision can be provided via other departments such as leisure services (e.g. dance classes) or education (e.g. music in schools).

47. Similarly, cultural services themselves can provide important other services to the community. For example, libraries can provide access to learning opportunities or provide tourist information to visitors or a one-stop-shop service to the local community.

48. Arts services are increasingly looking at ways to work across boundaries. The Arts Connect project in South East Wales is a collaborative project between seven local authorities aiming to create one arts service across the region. Further information on this project is provided by the Arts Connect local authorities in their submission to this inquiry.

49. Leisure and cultural services across local authorities are also looking at various alternative models for service delivery such as setting up trusts to run individual theatres, galleries or venues or creating trusts or subsidiary companies to deliver the whole service.

50. The WLGA has also been involved with researching possible all-Wales, regional and sub-regional collaborative options for public library services. Further discussion on possible options is due at the annual local authority cabinet members for leisure/culture meeting with CyMAL, Chief Officers of Leisure and Culture and the Society of Chief Librarians in mid October.

**Arts Council of Wales - Omnibus Survey**

51. The consultation questions provided for this committee inquiry asks a number of questions relating to the Arts Council of Wales's omnibus survey, and queries the differences in attendance and participation levels between various groups.

52. It is very difficult to know the complex reasons why some groups are more likely than others to participate in the arts, and the reasons may differ from area to area. It is also important to make the point that many people who take part in cultural activities might not class their hobby/interest/amateur involvement as ‘participation in the arts’.
53. The most important results from the Omnibus is that there have been upward trends in both participation (up from 28% to 35% overall) and attendance (up from 68% to 74% overall) between 2000 and 2009, and this should be celebrated and recognised.

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