Accessibility of arts and cultural activities – Disability Arts Cymru’s response

About Disability Arts Cymru

Mission statement

Disability Arts Cymru is a disability-led organisation which believes that Disabled and Deaf people have an exciting and valuable contribution to make to the arts in Wales.

We are committed to working with individuals and organisations to celebrate the diversity of Disabled and Deaf people’s arts and culture, and develop equality across all art forms.

Aims

1. Enable Disabled and Deaf artists in Wales to fulfill their potential both within disability arts and the mainstream

2. Raise the profile of Disabled and Deaf artists work, inspiring new audiences and developing appreciation of diversity within the arts

3. Develop creative partnerships to increase opportunities for Disabled and Deaf people of all ages to participate in and enjoy the arts both as makers and audience

4. Provide positive role models for aspiring young Disabled and Deaf artists

5. Assist arts providers throughout Wales in developing best practice in accessibility and inclusivity for Disabled and Deaf artists, participants, employees and audience

6. Develop new audiences of Disabled and Deaf people for the arts in Wales
7. Advise public bodies and statutory organisations on strategic issues relating to disability and the arts

8. Ensure excellence and effectiveness throughout all of our services across Wales

**Key Objectives 2010-13**

1. Work in partnership with Disabled and Deaf artists, bringing inspirational, high quality creative interpretations to audiences

2. Create training and showcasing opportunities for emerging Disabled and Deaf artists work, through our own projects and through partnerships with other organisations

3. Broker relationships between Disabled and Deaf artists, young disabled people, arts organisations, disability organisations, schools and colleges across Wales, encouraging creative accessibility and wider opportunities in the arts

4. Develop an advisory service for Disabled and Deaf artists on career & skills development

5. Provide a unique, free-of-charge information & advisory service covering a wide range of topics around disability and the arts

6. Lead disability equality training courses, seminars and consultancy services, enabling arts providers to engage with the wider issues of equality and diversity

Disability Arts Cymru is a small organisation with a huge remit; we are funded by ACW as the strategic organisation for disability in the arts in Wales. Over 27 years DAC has invented and re-invented itself in various incarnations but always with the same aim; to increase access to the arts for disabled and Deaf
people, not just as audience and participants, but as artists, performers, managers, leaders in the arts sector.

In recent years DAC has worked very successfully in collaboration and partnership with a wide range of organisations in the arts and voluntary sectors. This has proved a very effective use of resources and of great benefit to all involved in terms of shared experience. We want to continue this way of working and to extend it across the country, being more proactive in our work with Local Authorities and in the education sector. We will start to develop networks of organisations which will be much better equipped to support disabled artists in their career progress.

We know how important it is that disabled and Deaf artists have the opportunity to showcase their work, to experience different working environments, providing role models for young disabled and Deaf people and getting their work seen by companies who may eventually employ them.

DAC’s wealth of experience in the disability arts field is unparalleled. We aim to put all of this experience to use and to share it as very best we can.

**Response to consultation questions**

1. **Availability of high quality cultural experiences**

High quality cultural experiences are certainly more widely available to disabled people in Wales. Free entry to museums and galleries has made a real difference, as has the Arts Council of Wales’ strategy on disability, Moving Beyond. Arts and cultural services have had to make significant changes to their accessibility as duties under the Disability Discrimination Act increased. WAG’s investment has undoubtedly been put to good use and is making a great difference to disabled peoples lives.

However, full accessibility for disabled people still has a long way to go. Our culture, developed over hundreds of years, has historically excluded disabled
people. We are still struggling with old buildings which are largely inaccessible. ACW’s capital grants, through the lottery, have enabled significant improvements to be made, but some old theatres and galleries still only have partial (sometimes minimal) access for disabled people. Access for deaf people is piecemeal and tends to be expensive; captioned theatre is wonderful, but not widely available. There are few sign language interpreters trained to interpret in theatre. Hearing loops and infra-red systems benefit many hard of hearing people, but depend upon the venues maintaining them and switching them on!

Disabled people living in rural and deprived areas tend to face extra disadvantages. This is not just down to the arts and cultural sector; there is a knock on effect from unemployment, insufficient / inaccessible transport, lack of access to the internet, insufficient provision of personal support which might be needed to enable someone to attend an event.

There are many people working in the arts who are strongly committed to improving access for disabled people and who are doing a great job, struggling with tight budgets and awkward buildings. However, there is still work to be done on improving attitudes in some cases. We can not change our culture overnight. So it is a mixed picture. Where there is investment in the arts, improvements and better access for disabled people almost invariably follows. But there is still much to be done.

2. Promoting access and attracting new audiences

Arts and cultural services are very much better at actively promoting access, attracting new audiences and encouraging participation. We are seeing far more proactivity in letting people know about access facilities available, using access symbols, describing access on publicity and websites, developing contacts with disabled peoples organisations and groups and working in partnership to help spread the word and widen the audience base.

Opportunities for disabled people to participate have increased significantly in recent years, but there needs to be more.
As always, there is more to be done, especially with regard to accessibility of publicity material. But the picture is one of general improvement.

3. **Is current network of arts and cultural venues sufficient?**

In terms of access for disabled people the question is, are all of the venues fully accessible? The answer to this is no. The newer venues and those which have benefited from capital lottery grants through ACW are hugely improved, but there are still far too many venues where disabled people have a limited choice of seating, or have to use an alternative entrance. For example, access for wheelchair users to the Nation Museum and Gallery in Cardiff is terrible. A wheelchair user has to be ‘let in’ specially by a member of staff, through a gate (otherwise locked), along dark corridors cluttered with boxes and brooms, then up in a tiny lift. The whole thing has to be reversed when leaving. The Gallery may be free of charge, but for a wheelchair user or someone who can not use the steps, actually visiting is quite stressful.

4. **Impact of Arts Councils Investment Review**

The Arts Council have been faced with some extremely difficult decisions at this time of recession and general cutbacks. A lot depends upon how ACW are able to support those organisations which have been cut. It has always been ACW’s intention to provide exit strategies and to assist the 32 organisations in finding other ways to go forward. However, if the cuts result in cuts to projects on the ground, it is hard to see how this will not have an impact upon accessibility at local level, especially when those organisations are finding new ways to survive.

Through the Investment Review ACW intends to build a strong core portfolio of revenue funded clients, and have had extremely difficult decisions to make. If more funding was invested in the arts, the situation could be very different.

5. **Arts Council of Wales’s Budget**
Any reduction in the Arts Council’s budget is going to have a real impact on the accessibility of arts and cultural activities. The arts are already under-funded. Huge cuts are already being made in the arts. A cut in budget may well result in even more organisations having their revenue funding cut of reduced. ACW has already refined its portfolio extensively and there is little room for manoeuvre. Some of this will undoubtedly impact upon disabled people who are already hugely disadvantaged in our society.

ACW and Health Authorities in Wales recently launched their action plan on arts and health. Nobody attending the launch event at Wales Millennium Centre could fail to be impressed by the presentations demonstrating the very real benefits of the arts to people’s health. People experiencing mental health issues, recovering from stroke, cancer, heart disease, can all benefit significantly from arts activities and from a health environment enhanced by the arts. Cuts to ACW’s budget will ultimately affect this excellent work.

Outside of a health environment, simply participating or enjoying the arts and culture can lift our mood and enhance our sense of well-being. The arts have a real role in preventing ill-health as well as speeding recovery. More cuts to the arts budget will affect all of this.

6. Variation in range and quality of local authority cultural services

The situation is very patchy amongst local authorities. A few are very committed to accessibility in the arts, but this depends largely upon the attitude of the local authority’s arts officer. We have found just a few who are actively keen to engage with us to improve access and inclusion for disabled people. Sometimes the arts officer is committed but is not given the mandate to take the work forward. Resources are often spread thinly, and local authorities are not always keen to spend on the arts and culture.

7. Professionals and qualified people more likely to attend arts events

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I am not sure that this applies to disabled people, many of whom have been excluded from higher education and career development and are therefore less likely to have ‘professional’ status or qualifications. Disabled people tend to be very keen to attend and participate regardless of this.

8. Younger adults more likely to attend arts events

In our experience it is likely for young disabled people to encounter more difficulties attending arts events. They are less mobile than their non-disabled peers, more reliant on parents, guardians or carers to take them to and from arts events. The young people may have to justify their attendance. They may not even know that opportunities exist if they rely on family or carers to tell them. This can be particularly difficult for young disabled people in poorer families; being disabled almost invariably carries extra costs, and travel or ticket prices can prove an impossible burden for a family which is already struggling.

9. Females more likely to attend arts events

Not significantly amongst disabled people.

10. Welsh language speakers more likely to directly participate

Not noticeably so.

11. Other significant variations in publics attendance and participation

Reductions and complications in benefits, social services, transport, the public sector generally will also have a significant impact on disabled peoples ability to attend and participate. Many arts organisations have worked hard to develop audiences of disabled people, but these are under threat as the recession continues to bite.

12. Further comments
There is no doubt that good access and inclusion costs money. However, it need not be an extortionate amount that makes a difference. Arts organisations are used to managing and making amazing things happen on small budgets. We can do it, and it does work. But we need recognition from WAG of the importance of the arts to disabled people. Arts can improve the quality of our lives, to increase inclusion and ultimately, to empower us.

Maggie Hampton
Director, Disability Arts Cymru
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