



*Brycheiniog*

Director Andy Eagle

AC 57

23.09.10

**Inquiry into the Accessibility of Arts and Cultural Activities in Wales  
Submission by Theatr Brycheiniog, Brecon**

**Introduction**

Theatr Brycheiniog is one of Mid Wales' premier mid-scale presenting and production venues. The building is owned by Powys County Council (PCC) and was built as part of the redevelopment and regeneration of Brecon and the canal basin at the top of the Brecon and Monmouth Canal. Theatr Brycheiniog Cyf, the operating company, is a registered charity limited by guarantee.

Theatr Brycheiniog opened in 1997 with capital funding support from Arts Council Wales (ACW) Lottery, PCC, WDA and British Waterways. Since then it has established itself as the regional hub for South Powys attracting audiences from a 30 mile radius; to the west Llandovery, to the North Builth Wells, Llandrindod Wells, Hay on Wye, Crickhowell, Abergavenny and the Heads of the Valleys including Merthyr.

Roughly half of our audience is drawn from the Brecon LD3 postcode and the rest from the areas indicated. They travel recognising the quality of our programme, our ability to offer competitive ticket prices as well as the attractiveness of the theatre and setting.

Theatr Brycheiniog presents around 200 live performances a year selling close to 40,000 tickets annually and an extensive community participation programme. For example, we are home to the Mid Wales Dance Academy that has close to 300 young members, a notable number of which are boys. We are also home to the Brycheiniog Community Musical group, Brecon Town Band and Brecknock Little Theatre. We do not screen cinema but concentrate purely on live presentation and participation.

Our presentation programme highlights include regular visits by National Dance Company Wales, Royal National Theatre, BBC NOW, Mid Wales Opera, Sherman Theatr Cymru and Birmingham Stage Company. We have an extensive network of partnerships. In Mid Wales through the Mid Wales Entertainment Circuit (the umbrella body for the eight Mid Wales Theatres) and nationally through Creu Cymru (the Touring Agency for Wales) and our production co-partners; Music Theatre Wales, Earthfall and Swansea City Opera who each year we work together to produce and tour work nationally. In August 2010, we worked with National Theatre Wales on the production of the *The Persians* presented at the Cilieni Village Training camp on the Epynt.

A copy of our 2009/10 annual report is attached as well as our staffing structure and the CVs of the key staff.

Without wishing to sound arrogant, I believe that Theatr Brycheiniog is one of the most successful Lottery-built new theatres in Wales and the UK. The company is still delivering exactly what was the vision for the project and more besides; presenting quality work, engaging with our communities and providing access to the arts for this region. We receive core funding from ACW and PCC but earn the vast majority of our income through tickets sales and activities

such as catering and conferencing. Unlike many new lottery projects we have never received or required any bail-out funding, either on- off nor ongoing, since opening.

### **Access to the Arts in Wales and the ACW Investment Review**

For many years, I have advocated that the 'arts funding jam' in Wales has been spread too thinly. Organisations are only just surviving instead of thriving or developing with confidence. Brycheiniog has therefore always been supportive of the principles of the ACW Investment Review to invest in fewer, better and to have *quality* as the main benchmark. The process became even more vital for the arts in Wales as it has become clear that the impending squeeze on public funding will be the tightest in a generation.

Brycheiniog considers the process undertaken by ACW to have been thorough and transparent. Predominantly, the right decisions have been made. My only concern is the potential impact on the new non-RFO's relationships with local authorities - in the main, their main stakeholders. I believe that all efforts should be made to ensure that relationships with local authorities are strengthened. I would also like to add as a footnote that the spread of local authority expenditure on the arts in Wales is far from uniform. PCC do spend on the arts and recognise its importance in a way some local authorities even with far bigger budgets do not.

Nevertheless, the Investment Review has raised questions in relation to access to the arts in Wales. I believe some of these concerns may be countered by thorough and proper investment in the remaining core portfolio of clients and, in particular, the network of venues that remain across Wales.

In some areas, particularly rural ones, the issue of access is very pertinent. In Powys, Wyeside in Builth Wells faces closure in April 2011 and this would have a huge impact on the town and region with residents having to travel on a regular basis to either Newtown or Brecon. Let us not be fooled for they do this already for certain shows as our patron databases will indicate. However, to expect them to do this more regularly will surely impact on their attendance levels, ability to interact with the arts and, ultimately, their quality of life in an already isolated area. It must also be noted that Wyeside provides an invaluable cinema provision which attracts many young people locally.

There is, however, a way forward. In recent months, the boards and respective managements of Brycheiniog and Wyeside have been working together to find a solution and they have reached consensus. They are proposing that Brycheiniog takes on the delivery of the arts service in Builth through one centralised core management in Brecon - resulting in significant savings and ensuring access to the arts remains in Builth for a fraction of the previous cost to ACW and PCC. This joint working and centralised management around one 'hub' is also a novel and exciting innovation for Wales which we believe can be replicated across the country. Our colleagues at Wyeside are also making a submission to the committee that specifically addresses the issues of access in Builth. I would like to endorse their response to the committee and the points they make. We both look forward to working together and hope that ACW and PCC are able to ensure Wyeside remains open in the future by supporting the joint working proposal.

Should committee require further information on this model we would be happy to supply it or discuss it as appropriate.



*Brycheiniog*

Director Andy Eagle

## Individual question Responses

1. Wales now has an enviable network of mid-scale performance venues; Brycheiniog, Aberystwyth, Torch Theatre, Mwldan and so on. All venues programme and produce exciting accessible programmes which are often high quality, but not as consistent or as regular basis as we truly believe Wales deserves. Ultimately, this is due to venues' ability to buy in quality product from the UK or internationally but, because of insufficiently sized budgets, they are not able to do this and take significant financial risks in order to develop audiences on a sustainable basis.

I often compare Brycheiniog to Hereford Courtyard Centre For The Arts in England. Unveiled at about the same time, both theatres have very similar size capacities but Hereford receives annual public investment in of about £500,000 whilst Brycheiniog currently receive less than £300,000. The Courtyard operates in a town of 50,000+ but Brycheiniog in a town of 8,000. Nevertheless, we present very similar programmes annually. That is because we operate to our maximum efficiency and punch well above our weight on ticket sales. However, The Courtyard may also, if they choose, go for shows and tours well beyond our financial capacity because their budget allows for risk.

A specific problem in Wales is the availability of high-quality touring English language drama. High quality English companies such as Kneehigh, Headlong, Birmingham Rep, Northern Stage are beyond most Welsh theatre budgets but, unfortunately, Wales is not producing the mainstream English touring theatre it should. Wales has some good companies who could fill this gap but they find it difficult within their existing budgets. We wait to see how National Theatre Wales will work with the venues in Wales - their first year seems to be dominated by site specific work. The quality is not questioned but it does appear they wish to present almost anywhere but in a theatre, which contradicts the strategy of building up a network of theatres across Wales. The one outfit in Wales positioned to present really good English language touring work is Clwyd Theatr Cymru. Brycheiniog generally books the company's work as it is always of high quality and well received by audiences. However, their touring pattern is sporadic, they announce tours often too late for our booking diaries and so they do not feature as often as I (and other directors of theatres) would like. This seems a missed opportunity for the sector and I hope it can be rectified in the future.

In short, I believe audiences in Wales are not consistently receiving the same access to high quality arts as those in England or Scotland. A very modest extra investment or re-direction of support into the venues would counter this and transform the country's provision and opportunities. Assembly Government's investment is appreciated and effective in that there is a great network of venues, but investment needs to be greater, more on a par with the rest of the UK and, dare I say it, the countries of Northern Europe such as Holland and Germany, if we are to capitalise on our investments and be considered a modern European nation and culture. I recognise such aspirations are difficult in these times but such a relatively small amount is required when one considers against the huge budgets of other departments such as Education and Health (and particularly when one considers the returns the arts brings for Wales).

2. At Brycheiniog, we work hard to engage with audiences, communities and encourage participation. We use all modern marketing techniques available to us such as on-line ticketing, website, brochure production, social media and distribution to mailing lists and e-lists. We offer tickets with concessions to encourage access and employ an Education and Outreach Officer to work with schools, groups and those from disadvantaged areas. Additional investment in our venue would allow us to reduce ticket prices and improve access to certain groups.
3. This has been covered by the points previously raised in the document relating to Wyeside.
4. I agree with the decisions of the Investment Review though appreciate there are "access" pressure points. Again, this has been discussed in relation to Wyeside. However, the impact on access if the status quo were retained would be even more detrimental to the arts in Wales. Wales needs a well-funded portfolio that can operate to their maximum and plug the access gaps that exist. My argument is that the remaining portfolio needs to be funded better or at least be protected from impending cuts as much as possible. Concentrating funding on fewer stronger organisations is exactly the right strategy for the future.
5. A reduction in arts funding would have a massive effect on the issue of quality access to the arts in Wales. ACW has prepared a new client portfolio to take Wales forward and stand alongside our colleagues in England, Scotland and Europe. ACW have been responsible in preparing a way forward that recognises the future funding pressures. To reduce funding now would effectively "pull the rug" from the under the feet of ACW when they have acted openly and responsibly to secure a strategic future for the arts in Wales.

Relatively speaking, public spending in Wales on arts through the Culture budgets is quite small but reasonably effective in comparison to other departments. The real public sector funding problems are not in arts and culture but in the big ministries and it are these that should be targeted first for savings. The arts sector is lean, efficient, dynamic and employs many people in Wales. We will live in a poorer nation if we do not maintain investment in our arts.

6. This has been touched on previously. Some authorities do support the arts and some do not. PCC does and this should be recognised and applauded. However, until arts provision is statutory, it will always remain vulnerable within local authorities. As a client of ACW and PCC, I would like the annual uncertainties of local government spending rounds to be removed. Let's put core arts provision at the heart of Local Authority remits and make it statutory. A policy idea for Wales that could lead the UK and allow us to plan years in advance as opposed to a year on year basis.
7. Ensuring that the arts is at the heart of education is a key part of ensuring that all sections of the community and all types of people engage in the arts. Even today, in our all-singing, all-dancing talent show celebrity obsessed world, there are certain preconceptions about the arts - that it is for a certain class of people for example - which need to be broken down before it becomes cemented. Ensuring schools attend a theatre performance every term and work closely with their local theatre would address this. All theatres should have capacity in their budgets to employ Education and Outreach teams and encourage participation from an early age. An increase in core investment would also allow greater flexibility on ticket pricing so that this is no longer a barrier to access. In rural areas, transport schemes could also be set up and targeted for use by certain section of society.
8. This is not our experience at Brycheiniog but that is principally to do with the demographic of Brecon and this area. We work hard to encourage older audiences and younger audiences with the programme and activities we present.
9. That is not our experience at Brycheiniog. We deliberately present a broad programme. Some of these events will appeal more to women than men and vice versa. The key is to get men into events such as dance and this can be done by targeting groups and breaking



*Brycheiniog*

Director Andy Eagle

down perceived barriers. For example, we did a very successful workshop with Earthfall dance based around the New Zealand Haka that encouraged many men to dance in a way they had not before. It is about being inventive but also having the resources to be inventive and deliver original ideas.

10. Wales needs to produce high quality Welsh language touring work for its theatres. At present, provision is sporadic and often not of sufficient calibre. This needs to be addressed. Our experience is that English language audiences are more likely to participate in the arts. This may be a regional variation as Brecon is not a Welsh-speaking stronghold.

11. In rural areas we quite simply have to work harder to attract audiences and participants. Sparse population bases, transport issues and a low wage economy are all factors we have to work within. Urban areas undoubtedly have problems as well but they do at least have more people on the doorstep. Rural arts provision I would argue requires greater investment in order to counter these inherent problems. When attendances and participation numbers are considered for an event or a performance statistics hide the true story and tend to be compared across the whole country like for like. However if we get the same number for an event in say Cardiff the true scale of audience achievement is actually at least double.

12. We have a network of quality, professional, well managed theatres across Wales. Let's invest in them and be proud of it.

Andy Eagle  
Director