

Powys Arts Forum

Response to Draft Compact between the Arts Council of Wales and the Voluntary Cultural Sector in Wales – ‘Working Together’

Background & Context

While recognising the importance of the Voluntary Sector in articulating and addressing health & social concerns of the communities of Wales, Powys Arts Forum is less convinced of the value of this distinction in relation to arts and culture.

Historically the Voluntary Sector has reacted with resourcefulness and imagination to a wide range of challenges, providing innovation and new thinking on issues such as Community Transport (Wheels to Work, Demand Responsive Services) Low Incomes (Credit Unions) and the Environment (community re-cycling schemes). This has been in contradistinction to the more conservative approaches of local and national governments, and often has the advantage of direct engagement with the public.

The situation within the arts is quite different, where innovation and imagination are to be found across the sector, and where the public are already engaged directly with the galleries and venues as customers, potentially as artists, sometimes as volunteers, often as co-promoters.

Having said that, we recognise that the situation within the cities of Wales and the national companies may be quite different, but would point out that the overwhelming majority of arts and culture takes place in small-scale and rural contexts. This does not, of course, make them any the less important in the cultural life of Wales. Nor does it mean that they are less likely to achieve international or ground-breaking significance.

We note in passing that the process of awarding Beacon Company status seems to have taken place without any reference to the artistic community at large, being a process carried out entirely within the Arts Council of Wales. This may proceed from what appears to us to be a false distinction between voluntary and professional, which is a questionable value judgement, but we are willing to be proved wrong.

We call upon future developments of this strategy to recognise the potential in a more integrated approach to arts and culture than this document currently provides.

Definitions

For the reasons stated above we are not convinced that **‘Voluntary Cultural Sector’** is a meaningful term in practice.

Shared Values

In principle the right to engage with the arts is incontestable. In practice that right is modified by the question of resources. We expect to be allowed to write poetry on the back of an envelope at any time and in any place, but not to create public art on a monumental scale wherever we want. We would prefer to campaign for a fixed percentage of GDP rather than an open-ended commitment to push for more, which by its very nature can never be satisfied.

Increased openness in the decision-making on how and why funds are allocated would also be desirable.

We note the emphasis on social and economic values in the shared values, but would prioritise over these the right to create artistically-satisfying art. Perhaps it is time to recognise that those of us for whom meaningful artistic experience is important have 'special needs'. Any attempt to operate as if the arts are or can be equally meaningful to all is damaging to the creative potential of the arts. This is not the same as providing equal opportunity of access which is fundamental.

Recognition

We are not sure what is meant by this section. Since some of the activity that is not within the Voluntary Cultural Sector also fulfils the same criteria it doesn't seem to be helpful.

Representation

We welcome and applaud a commitment to a reasonable period for consultation. Twelve weeks seems a reasonable amount of time.

If resources were provided to facilitate the consultation the process might be more democratic than it currently is. It seems to us inevitable that any consultation will have more response from revenue-funded clients of ACW than elsewhere.

We welcome the opportunity of receiving feedback, and hope that we can receive information regarding the process as well as the conclusions.

Resources

This section seems to be largely made up of good practice which we would hope ACW would be applying this approach to all clients. If, on the other hand, all of their clients are within the Voluntary Cultural Sector, then this would seem to be redundant.

We are not convinced that good practice in employment and management necessarily emanate from the Voluntary Cultural Sector, and would wish to draw our good examples from wherever we find them.

*Philip Freeman, trustee, Powys Arts Forum Limited
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