

## Investment Review Discussion Paper

An important part of the Investment Review is to encourage debate and discussion on a range of arts issues.

We've asked 11 authors to prepare discussion papers on 5 different subjects. This is one of these papers. The brief didn't request specific proposals or recommendations, instead the authors were asked to offer their individual and personal views to stimulate and provoke discussions. Any views or opinions expressed in the discussion paper are the author's own and not those of Arts Council of Wales.

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Title: **Arts Venues in Wales**

Author: **Dilwyn Davies**

The creation and consumption of art and culture is vital for the health and well-being of any society, arguably as vital as other basic measures of civilisation, such as nourishment, shelter, healthcare and education. Throughout history, the human race has sought to express itself and make sense of its place in the world through its creation of, and engagement in, art – in its widest sense a broad spectrum that encompasses and reflects ideas of culture and heritage, enables people to explore their ideas, feelings, responses, mental and physical landscapes, and, critically, to try to communicate those ideas and feelings to their fellow humans.

On the one hand, art – “the quality, production, expression, or realm, according to aesthetic principles, of what is beautiful, appealing, or of more than ordinary significance” – should exist entirely in its own state, made by its creator, without the need for it to be seen, witnessed, experienced by others. But the essence of the creation of art is that an act of both expression and communication is taking place; those that create are not only reaching inside themselves and using their own skills as a means of exploration and expression, but also attempting to convey something to those that might engage with their output.

As an arts professional who has been working for the past fourteen years in that section of the arts community that is intrinsically focused on encouraging people to consume art and culture, I am naturally interested in, and passionate about the way in which we can connect consumers with art and its creators, and encourage them to participate in the creative process in order to place art and culture as centrally and importantly in people's lives as food, warmth, health and love.

This paper focuses on arts venues in Wales. A general dictionary definition of venue is “a place where an event or meeting is held; the scene or locale of any action or event.” In arts terms the meaning is clear – any location where people attend to consume or participate in an arts-based event, be it a theatre, gallery, arts centre, cinema, school, community hall, field, beach or car park.

The role of arts venues in Wales is absolutely critical to the success of the nation’s arts strategy in its widest sense. Venues are the vital lynchpin that connects art with its consumers, artists with audiences. Venues have the ability and facilities to present arts events and, just as critically, to market to and communicate with their potential audiences. The ability to market arts events is crucial to the role of arts venues, which develop long-term and widening relationships with their catchment communities and audiences, encouraging people to attend, participate and consume a wide range of artistic fare. Without arts venues, there would be very little connection between art and audiences.

The fact that much arts activity in Wales is subsidised by public money only goes to underline the arts sector’s (those of us who administer that money, or use it to create or present art) collective responsibility to maximise public engagement and benefit wherever we can. That is not to argue that we shouldn’t sometimes aspire to produce great art of the highest quality purely for its own sake, but to state that, in general, we have a collective moral responsibility to ensure that the arts enrich and inspire every single person living in Wales. We have to ensure access to the arts for every man, woman and child in Wales, and venues are the key to delivery.

Wales is a small country with an incredibly rich artistic and cultural heritage. This is a rock on which to build a future where the arts become increasingly important to the population and profile of Wales.

The Investment Review provides a great opportunity to refocus, plan for our collective future and ensure that the work we do is as effective and successful as possible. The whole of the arts sector is painfully aware that too little public money has been spread too thinly for too many years. Action is needed to ensure a healthy future for the arts sector, and the population it serves. That action should include advocacy at the highest political level and in the most compelling terms to communicate the achievements, successes and importance of the arts sector to date, the potential we have not yet realised (particularly in locking the arts into a central role in political planning for economic, social and cultural regeneration), and to argue for increased and sustainable public funding to ensure the potential can be realised.

However, the action also requires us as a sector - the whole arts community and the Arts Council of Wales working together in partnership - to take a critical look at ourselves and implement a wide range of innovative and creative ideas to maximise the impact of the public funding available.

The critical importance at this time of the Investment Review in determining and agreeing the future strategy for arts venues in Wales can not be understated. Wales has a rich network of

arts venues, big and small, rural and urban, some more financially stable than others, and some better resourced and funded than others. Together, whatever their health and effectiveness, they form a vital network through which a wide and rich variety of art connects with the Welsh public.

There have been some impressive achievements in the past ten years as a result of ACW Lottery Capital investment, and we consequently have many new or refurbished arts venues to be proud of. Recent developments via the Arts Outside Cardiff scheme have seen arts venues developing production activity and being more actively engaged in the creation of art.

The role and influence of venues has changed remarkably since the advent of AOC; venues are now no longer garages in which companies park productions but are now empowered organisations with the ability to develop production projects of their own, or work collaboratively and creatively with other venues and production partnerships with common aims and ideals. They have the self-confidence to choose product that's best for them, and do not feel obliged to take whatever's on offer just because it's originated in Wales.

There are also many success stories of impressive community-based activity, education and outreach, artist development, and remarkable achievements against the odds, but if you were to ask most of my colleagues if they felt their critically important contribution to the arts ecology of Wales was sufficiently recognised, or even adequately understood, I suspect the vast majority would answer no.

The Arts Council of Wales' recently published document Artform Strategies 2008-2013 contains much text on the development of artforms, but little on how we enable the artistic output to be seen by potential audiences. The creation of art in isolation from its consumption neglects to consider how venues might be involved, what they might do to successfully grow audiences for the art produced, and where the investment and skills required to achieve this will come from.

A strategy for the presenting sector – the arts venues - does not yet exist. It is badly needed and long overdue. Similarly there is no dedicated officer within ACW who has responsibility for the presenting sector in the way that drama, music, dance and the visual arts and crafts have their own dedicated officers. The 'Presenting Strategy' needs to be a well researched document, produced after extensive consultation with the presenting (and producing) sector, containing clear strategic vision for the future of Arts Venues in Wales.

The impending Investment Review is causing great concern throughout the presenting sector. Whilst a number of arts centre and theatre venues were designated Regional Performing Arts Centres - a recognition of their strategic importance - under the Arts Outside Cardiff scheme, there remain many more venues who feel under threat, or unrecognised, because they were not designated RPACs, or subsequently given Beacon Awards. The inference, in the absence of any published presenting strategy, is that they are not strategically important and that their future is therefore vulnerable as a result of the Investment Review.

If there was a Presenting Strategy in place, the future of these vulnerable venues would be clearer. However, the key question now is how can critically important decisions about the future of the arts venues network be taken via the Investment Review process without a clear strategy in place? And if decisions are taken without a strategy, how can we be sure that we have collectively discussed and examined all the possible innovative and creative options before the decisions are made?

The strategic importance of individual presenters/arts venues needs to be established, as does a clear strategic view for the presenting sector as a whole. Whilst this might come out of the Investment Review, it would be preferable and sensible for it to be achieved before the Review. But the timescale of the process probably does not allow for this.

Experience, particularly recent AOC Production activity, has shown that the ability to produce and tour performing arts productions in Wales depends on a rich variety of presenters being willing and able to promote a range of product of different scales across a variety of artforms. Some venues have developed certain successful artform specialisms, whilst others are weaker in some artforms. This is not a problem; it is part of an overall ecology. Not every venue can take every production offered for touring in Wales; there are issues of financial risk, technical requirements and audience development by artform to consider for any presenter before they will contract a performance. To achieve a moderate sized tour produced in Wales, financially viable for the producer and arguably morally justifiable relative to the public investment that supports the production, perhaps some 10 to 20 venues are required to commit. Experience suggests that an overall pool of some 40 to 50 operating venues is required to make a tour of that size viable. If the size of this pool is reduced substantially, then it will become more difficult for producers to achieve viable tours in Wales.

The current Creu Cymru membership stands at around 52 presenting venues or promoters. I am sure that each one could make a strong and valid case for their strategic importance, based on geographic catchment, service to rural areas, culture, language and community, artform specialism, capacity, technical facilities and so on.

Though one could argue that more than 50 venues in a country the size of Wales is perhaps a luxury we can no longer afford, it is apparent that if we want to ensure a broad spread of artforms is accessible to audiences across Wales, serving more rural and isolated catchments as well as urban ones, and offering producers a viable touring network, then we must find a way of maintaining the current venue network and supporting it properly. If we lose, say, 10 of these venues as a result of the Investment Review, the venue ecology will be badly damaged.

Given these considerations, I believe that the current network is appropriate for our aspirations as a nation. It serves a largely rural nation well on a community level. Whilst we have a high number of venues, in the first instance we must try to maintain the network we have, even if it means some innovative action. With the current strategic exceptions of Merthyr Tydfil and Wrexham, I am not aware of any further gaps in provision and we must try to maintain the current network as a priority over providing for any new perceived gaps.

The supply of product from Welsh producers could be better. Consistency in supply could be improved significantly as could the range and suitability of product on offer and dialogue with the presenting sector. Inadequate lead times are often an issue, with some touring companies providing insufficient notice of touring productions.

There are further complications. From my own experience, I know that presenters are often contacted by producers or companies keen to secure a booking (for a reasonable fee) for their newly funded project only to be disappointed when the promoter politely explains that, in their view, the project would be financially too risky and therefore impossible to present to an audience. There follows a negotiation during which the presenter might offer the producer a very low fee or split deal as the only basis on which a booking will be offered; the producer either accepts a bad deal to secure a performance – gaining a funding output requirement but sustaining a loss to the production budget – or refuses and delivers a smaller tour than anticipated (with consequent answerability to the project's funder).

This is a small but practical example of how, as financial circumstances become more difficult, promoters become less able to take risks (and financial losses), and therefore large sections of less commercially viable product simply become impossible to promote. Producers are forced to accept less favourable financial deals, which in turn affects the viability of production projects. Ultimately, the diversity and volume of product available and presented will decline, along with the ability of venues to promote that product. Welsh promoters are, of course, not tied to Welsh companies, and will look over the border if they can't find what they are looking for in Wales.

As a consequence, it could be that some of the key presenting aims of artform strategy are not achieved because of presenters being exposed to unacceptable financial risk. If key decisions to develop certain aspects of artform strategy are taken, the financial consequences of presenting those performances (and developing longer-term audiences for them) also need to be considered and provided for – by a joined-up linkage between artform strategies and a presentation strategy.

Some presenters have become important specialists in certain artforms, and have successfully developed their audiences accordingly. Is it reasonable to expect every venue to present a wide cross-artform programme, or is it better to allow clear and strategic venue-based specialisms to develop, and look at the whole presenting picture across Wales to appreciate the diversity of performances and artforms presented?

Whilst the perceived notions of 'rich' and 'poor' presenting venues have recently created a degree of tension within the presenting sector, especially as some venues have come under perceived or real threat of funding withdrawal, the reality is often more complex. Some venues linked to local authorities or academic institutions, for example, may enjoy relatively good professional terms and conditions, relatively high levels of local authority/academic core funding, and many key company functions (e.g. human resources, health and safety) handled by their parent organisations. Independent organisations, however, have to manage their own

affairs without recourse to a larger parent organisation or local authority, which incurs substantial additional costs. Staff in independent arts venues often have poorer employment terms and conditions than many of their colleagues, and this can prove damaging to staff morale, retention and recruitment. A national professional framework aimed at stabilising all venues with similar terms and conditions would be welcome. ACW should take a lead role in advocating an improvement in sector terms and conditions, especially for independent venues and arts organisations.

The threat posed to the arts venue sector generally by the lack of access to capital funding is becoming extremely serious. It is essential that venues have regular and reliable access to capital funding to repair, renew and update equipment that has a limited life span, or becomes obsolete. In addition, many venues need substantial capital investment in their buildings in order to continue to function. If we are to have a high quality arts venue network, the provision of a substantial capital programme is essential.

Whilst the preceding paragraphs are an attempt to describe, from my own experience, the current issues relating to the arts venues sector in Wales, they do not offer any kind of practical suggestions of how we can improve matters. Given current circumstances, we have to be positive and pragmatic as a sector and consider some innovative ways of moving forwards. We have to prove individually and collectively that we each aspire to be a 'centre of excellence'; whatever our strength or specialism, let us each be clear about what that is, and accept our duty to perform at a consistently high level in both output and quality. We should be working closely with ACW to make the Investment Review a positive opportunity that redefines the way we work.

If we accept that it would be initially better to try to maintain the current venue network than lose some venues, there are a number of cost-saving or efficiency-increasing options that we should consider first.

- Savings and efficiencies could be made by developing venue clusters, perhaps grouped around RPACs, which would work closer together and share resources, services and expertise (e.g. marketing, financial, administrative, technical, professional development, training, programming), whilst not compromising the independence and identity of the individual venues. A shared technical team, for example, ought to produce savings and greater efficiencies.
- Box office and marketing systems could also be shared between venue clusters, again potentially led by RPACs. For example, one on-line ticketing system could be securely provided to a venue cluster, with each individual venue only having access to its own data. On-line sales reduces the need for box office staff.
- Box office staff and services could also be shared through a venue cluster. Cost efficiencies could be made by reducing opening hours and routing box office phone sales through a central box office service.

- The joint promotion of single events (at one agreed venue) by two or more promoting partner venues shares and lessens the financial risk, and benefits from a joint marketing approach.
- The reduction in operating hours at some venues to, say 3 or 4 days per week would reduce costs and overheads but maintain an operating venue.

In addition to the ideas listed above, there are also a number of action issues relevant for the venue sector.

- The current model of investment in the production sector does not always produce the kind of output that is required by the presenting sector. A more joined-up and strategic approach between artform production and presentation should be taken that considers the needs of presenters at early stages of projects.
- In general, I find it difficult to morally justify public investment in productions without appropriate consideration of how they might connect with or attract their audiences. This is particularly true in a difficult financial climate. More sector debate or dialogue would be welcome. At what price art?
- More open sector debate over issues of quality would be welcome. If we are moving forward with peer assessment, we need to develop our individual and collective ability to objectively assess and be assessed in a constructive way. Are we mature and secure enough?
- Further exploration or development would be welcome of the cross-artform AOC model of production/co-production that places more power in the hands of presenters, and makes them more active partners rather than passive receptors.
- We should share more of the best practice and experience gained through the AOC production activity, particularly between AOC producers.
- We should examine and question the value of investment made in the production sector relative to the investment needs of the venues sector.
- We should use and share the expertise that lies within the arts venues sector more – there are many examples of success, experience and best practice throughout the sector that could be shared and developed more widely, e.g. key artform specialisms, audience development, marketing, programming, community work, participation, outreach, education.

Finally, I would like to pay tribute to the amazing work done by my colleagues in arts venues throughout Wales.

Dilwyn Davies

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