

# Still searching for support....

music on

**HOLD**

Opportunities to take part in music making appear to be flourishing in Wales. New developments through the Prince's Trust, National Youth Arts Wales, Making Music and others complement well-established organisations from the BBC National Orchestra of Wales to Community Music Wales. The range runs from the local eisteddfod network through to other locally-based youth music and community development-based projects.

The National Assembly is clearly keen on the community arts, recognising the importance of community music. Last year, Cynog Dafis, then Chair of the Committee responsible for culture, told us the Assembly was "aware that community music can help in encouraging participation in the wider sense, and involving those who are traditionally marginalised." He applauded the work of community arts organisations in "improving life skills and employment prospects, developing pride in an area, creating a co-operative environment, encouraging active citizenship, and assisting in advocacy." (Sounding Board, Summer '00).

A healthy musical and community arts culture, then – not surprising in a nation famed for its musical heritage, traditional and contemporary, local and nationwide. Surely a nirvana for community musicians? Yet community musicians across Wales, and particularly in the north have been telling Sound Sense that they feel isolated; the value of their work is not understood; and that they experience difficulties in finding more work, developing in their work, and linking up with others who could help them. Indeed, some musicians lucky enough to receive longer-term income via funding organisations are often expected to deliver 'community music' work with little or no background training or experience, and no support network with which to develop their skills and share good practice.

That community music is under-used and often not understood by potential supporters or 'purchasers' such as local authorities is perhaps not surprising. Even in authorities which employ musicians for projects, most officers find it hard to get hold of the right musician for a job, or of information on musicians working in their area, so tend to give work to the same musicians again and again rather than offering opportunities more widely. Officers also say there's not enough collaboration between music projects and musicians, which isn't helped by the fact that activities are low key and under-promoted.

The problem isn't lack of musicians. Musicians are working with groups of people in a rich variety of settings, from local festivals to hospitals; youth clubs to special needs centres. There's a wealth of musicians working through Community Music Wales in the south with great success, particularly in the youth and rock/pop music sector. But it's difficult for individual musicians to promote their work and an understanding of its nature and value, or to develop their practice. This is particularly true in north and west Wales, and for those who work in certain music genres. What is missing is support for such organisations and for musicians at any career stage, in whatever musical genre, language, and age range, and wherever they're based. There's not only no support, but often a basic lack of understanding or even discussion about what community music means across Wales, and what musicians (and which ones) are capable of delivering.

Ironically, a healthy music scene can make people assume that everyone has access to music-making here, and everyone who provides 'music workshops' is delivering community music. Perhaps this is why community music comes low on most local authorities' priorities. If there's patchy support for the arts across local authorities in Wales, then it's easy for authorities to feel that 'music's sorted'.

But how much of the work that's labelled as community music is really based on community arts principles? How can people share information about practice, and develop an understanding of what they're doing and how to make it better?

Partnerships between arts development organisations and local authorities might be an answer, but these are made difficult – particularly in north and west Wales – not only because of lack of funding, but lack of infrastructure. Arts Development Officers responsible for venues as well as overseeing arts provision across their authority are stretched enough without having to focus on a specific art-form and artists. As for 'joined up thinking', there's little chance of cross-departmental working except in the most enlightened authorities, because the vision simply hasn't translated to local authority level.

Both the Assembly and the Arts Council of Wales (ACW) recognise the need for support for individual artists in one way or another. An Assembly culture committee noted that "individual practitioners in the arts needed to be able to access funding in the same way as arts organisations" and that there were gaps in the provision of development opportunities for individuals. ACW is currently undertaking a review of umbrella and strategic organisations offering support to artists in Wales, but until this is complete, it says that their support for strategic development of community music will be put on hold. So while community music develops across the UK, community musicians in Wales may have to continue without the support they need and deserve for some time yet.

**Contact: Anita Holford**  
**Head of Communications**  
**Sound Sense tel: 01449 673990 or**  
**01600 719636**  
**e-mail: [info@soundsense.org](mailto:info@soundsense.org)**