

WALES ON THE MOVE



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The landscape for community musicians in Wales is changing. As the National Assembly for Wales reports on a major review of arts and culture the future looks set to open up many new possibilities.

Anita Holford looks at the impact this could have on community musicians

It's not been an easy time for working in the arts in Wales. Reports about a widening rift between the Arts Council of Wales (ACW) and the arts community have read like a soap opera in the national newspaper, the *Western mail*. Disagreements over funding decisions, particularly over Young People's Theatre, and accusations of lack of accountability have led to serious concerns over ACW's future.

And with England making all the headlines on arts funding – an extra £5m two years ago for *New audiences* initiatives then, last month, a whole £100m more (see p4) – it's sometimes felt like being the last kid at the party to get their goodie bag.

But it seems there's a light at the end of the tunnel. The National Assembly for Wales has been conducting a major review of arts and culture, giving those working in the arts an unprecedented opportunity to make their voices heard. In addition, an independent review into the management of ACW, begun by the assembly earlier this year, has allowed the arts community to air its grievances and share its views about the council's decision-making and its future.

The review was one of the first tasks the assembly set for its post-16 education and

training committee, the group responsible for culture. A paper in November 1999 showed that the assembly sees the arts not only as important in their own right – but more importantly as a means of achieving its own aims. The paper states that the arts and cultural industries will have a direct impact on “Better Job Opportunities”, “Better Education”, “Better Health”, “Better Quality of Life” and “Best Value” (no prizes for guessing that their corporate plan is entitled *Better Wales*). Cynicism aside, this recognition can surely only help community musicians’ cause.

In January of this year, the committee began the extensive consultation with the arts community in Wales. A series of road-shows allowed arts organisations – and the public – a chance to present their views. The consultation was structured around a set of twelve questions covering issues such as the objectives and funding priorities of an arts and cultural policy for Wales; the operation and accessibility of ACW; how the arts might tackle social exclusion.

Finally given the chance to shape the future a steady stream of organisations presented their case or submitted lengthy responses. Participatory music concerns were represented by a range of music, voluntary, and community organisations such as Voluntary Arts Wales (the development agency for the participatory arts in Wales, and part of Voluntary Arts Network); Community Music Wales; the Association for Community Arts; Community Dance

Wales (the development agency for community dance in Wales, and parallel in operation to Sound Sense) and Rhondda Cynon Taff Community Arts.

VAW argued for recognition of the value of participation in the arts at government policy level, and for a national infrastructure of umbrella bodies to support the grassroots activity. Like many of those who gave responses, they would like to see the assembly appoint a Secretary for Culture, and form a Wales cultural forum which would represent the views of the whole range of arts practitioners and organisations. It also suggested that the development of strategies for the arts, and the management of funding, should be carried out separately – which would entail a major change from the current ACW set-up.

CMW argued for a framework which coordinates all the organisations which might benefit from the arts, including education and social services, services for the elderly, healthy living centres, economic development and community regeneration. They described the value of their training initiatives and work with the socially excluded, as well as their partnerships with local authorities, the voluntary sector, and the music industry, and stressed the difficulties faced by organisations such as themselves with inadequate core revenue support, and short-term project funding.

Other themes that emerged from the review

Left: South Wales Intercultural Arts annual Cardiff MAS Carnival. The gathering, involves over 400 local participants who have taken part in three weeks of costume-making, carnival percussion and carnival dance workshops

Supporting community music in Wales

Proposals from the assembly's culture review that could help community music

- A cultural consortium – Creu Cymru – which would link all the assembly-sponsored public bodies and other bodies with an interest in culture, including ACW (or its successor), the Sports Council, the Welsh Development Agency, the Welsh Local Government Association, and others. The consortium would be responsible for delivering the assembly's cultural objectives, including developing cultural industries, identifying overlaps, improving access to investment and developing skills.
- A cultural forum, representing the major arts organisations and umbrella bodies in Wales
- The inclusion of arts projects in strategies arising from the assembly's *Communities first* regeneration proposals
- The strengthening of community arts umbrella groups, and their inclusion in the cultural forum
- Creation of a network of animateurs working in the community and a Chair in community arts at a Welsh higher education institution
- Extension of lottery funding from three to five years; change in policy towards use as core funding (under strict conditions)
- Expansion of the music development fund
- Education development plans to include new sections on artistic and cultural development, and more artists in schools; improving skills and accreditation in the voluntary sector
- Expansion of the diversity of music provision and greater recognition of traditional music, jazz and pop
- Improving the situation for Welsh composers
- The national arts companies to include work in the community and with educational institutions