

Findings and recommendations report

Project

To deliver a series of stakeholder conversations about widening creative and cultural engagement with the semi-rural community of Penderyn and its surrounding area.

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1. Introduction

Re:cognition was pleased to have been selected by the Arts Council Wales and the National Museum of Wales to deliver engagement with people from semi-rural disadvantaged communities as part of the 'widening of creative and cultural engagement with communities across Wales' project. Our work centred around the South Wales valley communities of Penderyn, Aberdare and Hirwaun.

The overall project aim, was to help uncover and understand the root causes of the commonly assumed negative perceptions and explore the possible dislocation of certain demographics from what is commonly called 'the arts'. To be truly relevant to all people in Wales, this dislocation must be first identified and then addressed. As a foundation of developing our understanding of the perceptions and possible barriers for under-represented communities, we needed the authentic voices of the people who live in the identified areas, and crucially not ordinarily engaged with the 'art and culture' scene.

We were very pleased that our organisation was chosen to partner on this project, as we have had a long-standing relationship with the arts, and understand the transformative effects art and culture can have when assisting in long and lasting positive societal change.

2. Project aims, objectives and principles

Both ACW and NMW acknowledge that they, along with their commissioning partner organisations, have not successfully reached as deeply into disadvantaged communities as they would have wished. This lack of reach is hindering their ability to deliver programmes and activities that could contribute to tackling the recognised social inequalities in the art and culture sectors of Wales. To dismantle the long-held inequalities associated with audience participation, it is vital that the rich and diverse histories and talents of all the communities of Wales are reflected in not only what is offered to audiences to view, but also for individuals and communities to be reflected in the production and participation of 'art and culture' within their communities.

The clients' wished to build an engagement/intervention approach or approaches which actively engaged people from disadvantaged communities in the process of discovering the barriers to involvement and participation within the arts and cultural landscape of Wales. To assist this, we created a semi structured perception-based interview structure which sought to explore the following question themes:

- Existing knowledge of Arts Council Wales and National Museums Wales.
- What counts as art and culture in these communities.
- where it happens,
- how often,
- who makes it,
- who experiences it, and
- cultural democracy.

We understand that any developed approaches cannot be homogeneous, they need to be contextual to the people/communities involved, so therefore must be derived from those same people.

The project aimed to reveal:

- What relevance do the principles and practices associated with the notion of Cultural Democracy have to those being interviewed and their wider community?
- What are the best methods to use when engaging with this semi-rural disadvantaged community?
- Initial insights into this community's art and culture aspirations both from the point of view of being a creator and a consumer of art and culture.
- Identify what these communities would want from a programme designed to fund and/or support creative activity within their locality.

The results of this research will assist ACW create a pan-organisation Strategic Collaborative Programme, and help shape and inform the National Museum Wales' ten-year strategy. This Strategic Collaborative Programme, aims to promote broad and inclusive engagement with the communities that currently face the greatest disadvantages, which are often excluded from what is considered by the arts establishment to be 'arts and culture'.

Both clients recognised that this work must take place to ensure that the perspectives, wants, desires and aspirations of semi-rural disadvantaged communities are understood, the barriers to participation and practice identified and possible means for their mitigation offered.

Using this methodology, we aimed to:

- Identify key potential elements of a strategic programme to widen cultural and arts engagement across semi-rural economically disadvantaged areas of Wales.
- Develop insights allowing us to suggest types of support and ways of working, that might help to improve or increase opportunities.

These are important aims and may eventually lead to a more equal and inclusive arts and cultural scene that reflects the creativity and rich cultural diversity of all our communities of Wales; allowing us to confidently reflect and comment on society, sharing our values and challenging perceptions and ideas to better understand our own lives and histories and those of others, whilst discovering new ways of expressing our intersectional needs and desires within our shared spaces and communities - creating a true and equal cultural democracy.

This study is quite unique, but the aims of ACW/NMW will not be fully realised by this report alone. However, this research could form the basis of further studies.

3. Methodology

All our work on this project was routed in the theory and practice of Grounded Theory.

Approach to engaging project stakeholders

One principle of this type of community engagement work, is that where possible, directly engage with people in their own spaces. For instance, when engaging with a community group, we endeavour to meet with them at their regular meeting space and at the time/date they would have normally met. However, Covid intervened. In the first week of September 2020, we originally intended to use the following engagement methods:

1. Street interviews working with Kitsch n Sync.
2. Door knocking
3. Telephone interviews
4. If possible, tapping into existing community online Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams groups
5. Targeted individual interviews

However, the Covid situation and associated restrictions meant we had to quickly revise the engagement methodology to the following:

1. Telephone interviews
Random numbers for the subject areas.
2. Street interviews
Working with Kitsch n Sync

Unfortunately, following the commencement of the national lockdown on October 23 2020, our street interviews had to be cancelled.

4. Summary of responses

Annex 1 - Findings of this report contains a full breakdown of findings alongside indicative quotes from respondents. The sample size was 72 people from a population of 44,940.

Question 1

When you hear the words Arts Council Wales and National Museums Wales, what comes to mind?

A low number of respondents demonstrated a firm understanding of the role of ACW (23%) and NMW (13%).

While this low recognition may not be crucial in itself, the lack of knowledge regarding the roles the organisations undertake may well impact on people's knowledge and ability to seek funding and opportunities, creating an opportunity gap between cities and the rural poor communities.

Responses to this question also indicate a blurring of the lines between NMW and museums in general.

Question 2

When you hear the word Museum, what immediately comes to mind?

86% of respondents evidenced a full or partial engagement response to this question. This was higher than Q1 figure where 65% (only 13% reported a firm understanding while 52% said they had a partial understanding). This is understandable for two reasons:

- 1) They had had time to think since Q1
- 2) In Q1, they were asked about the National Museums Wales and not simply museums

In general, there was a high level of knowledge demonstrated, however, when considering venues their responses were entirely centred on the greater Cardiff conurbation with no other Welsh venues being namechecked. This could indicate a very local approach to museum attendance which was born out through responses to later questions.

Question 3

When you hear the words art and culture, what immediately comes to mind?

The answers to this question were positive and quite varied. The positive response rate was high with only 7 people stating that art and culture had no meaning to them personally.

Welsh culture had the highest response of 41%. This was followed by 29% for different types of art; 26% of respondents singled out visual arts, and Heritage was mentioned by 20% of respondent.

The responses to the question also generated 12 singular responses.

The good wide-ranging set of responses, demonstrate a high level of knowledge of different art and cultural forms.

Question 4

Do you know anyone who has been supported by ACW or NMW?

The numbers here were low, with only 21% reporting yes, highlighting a lack of direct human connection between ACW/NMW and this community. It would be interesting to ask this question to people in other more networked parts of Wales, to see if this is a national, local or class issue.

This lack of this personal connection may have impacts if people wanted to progress in their artistic and cultural endeavours as accessible local role models can be what makes the difference.

Question 5

What do you think of the idea of Cultural Democracy?

Much discussion was generated by this question, indeed, more than any other question asked.

Initial responses indicated a very low recognition of the term, however, once explained and discussed, there was very high levels of support. The concept was seen as relevant and was supported by 74% of respondents, the highest support for any proposition in the study.

Many people quickly identified how practically it could be used to the benefit of their community. Indeed, one respondent citing an example where the principles of Cultural Democracy have already been put into practice in their own area.

33% of the respondents gravitated in their discussions towards a linkage of the term 'Cultural Democracy' and accessibility in its widest definition.

These positive discussions alongside their support for 'Cultural Democracy', was also reflected in the respondent's answers to later questions in this study.

Question 6

Tell me about the last time you attended museums / art venues?

This question revealed high responses for Cardiff based venues who took the top three places.

This question also revealed that those who cited the Coliseum were very passionate about their support for the venue.

Exhibitions, Music, Musicals and art were the most often cited when describing their visit.

The responses also revealed that 70% of the visits took place within the last two years indicating regular attendance.

Question 7

What would encourage you to visit museums / art venues?

This question offered participants the opportunity to express their preferences as participants within art and culture in Wales, and indicates a transactional relationship of desiring entertainment over more traditional ‘educational’ experiences.

Basically, the responses indicated that it's all about the content, price and accessibility, both of the content and location.

The most popular genres were musicals, plays both traditional and modern, big touring shows and exhibitions, bands, concerts, and History and social history.

The responses gravitated towards genres that could be described by some as entertainment.

Question 8

Have you ever attended an exhibition within the named local museums / arts venues?

15% of respondents, said they were not Interested in local museums or arts venues, which when compared to other questions is a strong negative score.

In regards to visits to local museums and arts venues, the Coliseum and the Aberdare (Cynon Valley) Museum, were by far the most well attended.

Colstars, comedians, films and bands were all cited as reasons to attend the Coliseum. In regard to the Aberdare (Cynon Valley) Museum, attendance appears to be helped because it is next door to a supermarket facilitating the ability of people to ‘pop in there for a cup of tea’.

While liked and appearing to be well attended, the Coliseum was not without criticism. These Included a lack of diverse content, seat size, and not enough modern or contemporary work.

A number of other close by well-known venues were not namechecked at all, including; Theatr Soar, Trecynon Community Hall, Redhouse Cymru, Pontypridd Museum, Steam Museum, and Cefn Coed Colliery Museum.

When we compare these reported local activities partaken by the respondents to their answers from question 7 where we asked ‘what would encourage you to visit museums / art venues?’, the locally provided art and culture activities do not line up with reported local aspiration, meaning local venues are not or can’t respond to local needs.

Activities provided locally	Attended	Activities wants from Q7
Musicals	5%	30%
Plays and theatre both traditional and modern	5%	30%
Big touring shows and exhibitions	5%	22%
Bands and concerts	13%	20%

This disconnect between local aspiration and what is provided locally is stark and may need to be addressed.

Question 9

Do you believe that the 7 named National Museum Wales projects and venues are connected/linked with your local community?

Only 25% of respondent considered NMW connected/linked to their community. This number is very low and may partially reflect the location of NMW museums although there is little disconnection of NMW from other museums.

There was a very high number of people who did not respond to this question, the largest number for any question. There are several possibilities why this question garnered such a low response - It may have been the way the question was formulated, or their knowledge of National Museum Wales was so low that confidence in answering was impaired, for instance.

Question 10

Do you know many people who have exhibited / performed at the named local museums / arts venues?

52% of respondents stated no/don't know to this question with 3% who did not provide an answer.

45% of respondent reported knowing people who have exhibited / performed at local museums / arts venues, with 76% of the them reported being connected through Colstars. Most of these connections were through familial bonds such as children performing in music, dance and drama.

The Colstars appear to have developed a high level of reach into this community. They appear to work very well with young people offering them good participative opportunities. This may not be said for local museums or the NMW, as no evidence was presented in regard to young people taking part in any of their educational projects indicating a lack reach into this community.

Question 11

What type of exhibitions / cultural events / performances would persuade you to visit the 7 National Museum Wales / arts venues?

This question was responded to with great enthusiasm with strong engagement to its content and the art/cultural forms placed forward as preference.

For ACW related responses, the desire for music in all its forms dominated the narrative, while for NMW related responses, the answers were more widely spread with exhibitions, big touring exhibitions, local history and social, and Welsh heritage/history being the most popular.

The responses and the tone of the engagement for this question offers much to build on.

Question 12

Thinking back before lockdown, were you aware of what exhibitions and arts events were taking place locally and nationally in Wales?

When answering this question, 80% of respondents were either not aware or only partially aware of what exhibitions and arts events were taking place locally and nationally in Wales. Only 20% of respondents considered themselves fully aware.

It may be the case here that on at least a local level, they are underestimating their knowledge as 58% of respondents had attended local events in the last year.

Question 13 & 14

Q13 - How would you like to be informed about new events/exhibitions?

Q14 - What do you think is the best way the Venue can inform local people about upcoming events/exhibitions?

When it comes to being personally informed, electronic dissemination is preferred by many people, however, over half of the respondents, namechecked posters leaflets flyers as a means through which they would also like to be informed.

Q14 sought views regarding how people think their community should be best informed. It is of some interest that there is a difference between Individual preference for email as outlined in Q13, with what respondent recommended for other local people. 37% identify email as their personal preference, but only 11% would recommend it for others in their communities.

What is clear is that no one method of informing or engaging suits all people.

Question 15

What do you consider to be art and culture?

When describing art, most respondents identified different art forms to illustrate their point.

When addressing culture, respondents offered a more varied responses when compared to their responses for art. The highest performing themes were; The way we live, Heritage and History.

A small (16%) enthusiastic cohort offered the interesting idea that everything that is part of our lives are connected and inseparable from art and culture.

To note: only one respondent namechecked the Eisteddfod indicating poor reach into this community of mainly English speakers. this lack of Welsh Language art and culture was also demonstrated in the responses to all other relevant questions.

Question 16

How connected do you feel to art and culture in your community?

Despite of regally attending art and culture event, 88% of respondents felt disconnected or partially disconnected to art and culture in their community.

With such conflicting data regarding attendance and connection, there may be a need to examine the quality of those local art/cultural experience attended by local people.

As we have seen from questions 7 and 8, there is a disconnect between local aspirations and the locally provided art and cultural genres. This may well have fed into this very high disconnection rate of 88%.

Question 17

What would you and/or your community want from a programme designed and funded to support creative activity in your locality?

The contributions to this question could be described as very enthusiastic. Some responses centred on general development with them knowing that things need to change but not being sure what to suggest, while other respondents came up with 123 concrete suggestions. Only two respondents were disengaged by the question.

- The want for more art and craft classes was very clear with over 50% of respondents in support. They identified 14 different art and craft activities that would benefit from focused classes.
- The previous discussion on democratising art and culture resulted in nearly a third wanting cultural democracy to be enacted. This was especially true regarding local people controlling what is funded.
- Nearly a third of respondents wanted more support for CYP focused art and cultural.
- Just over a fifth of respondents were keen for local theatre groups and the Coliseum to be better financially supported.
- Throughout this study, the Colstars have always been very well supported. In response to this question, 8% of respondents said they wanted them to be better funded.
- The effects of Covid on communities was noted with 16% of respondents wanting funded art/culture activities that respond to community cohesion issues exacerbated by Covid.
- Improve disability access and transport was cited by 10% of the respondents.
- More inter generation art and culture was supported by 5% of respondent. This included young people working on art and culture projects in nursing homes.

The number and the depth of the responses to this question illustrates a community that is extremely motivated and keen for more art and cultural opportunities in their local area, especially in the form of classes where people can develop their talent.

Question 18

What would be your final message to ACW/MNW.

This question was designed to give the respondents the ability to directly address ACW and MNW. The answers were rich and reflected much of the previous question lead discussions.

The responses were grouped by theme.

- The theme democratise art was supported by over a quarter of respondents. This response rate is similar to what was expressed and identified in Q17.
- Reflecting elements of cultural democracy, one third of respondents felt there was a need to focus on and invest in local communities.
- Again, similar to Q17 over a fifth wanted ACW/MNW to focus on Children and Young People.
- The poor and sporadic nature of information and promotional materials was noted with 8% wanting better ways of delivering this work.
- Throughout this study, lack of affordability has been a running theme including this question where 7% of respondents reported it as an issue to be addressed.
- Similar to Q17, the need for rebuilding communities with art and culture post Covid was cited by 8% of respondents.
- The need for a more rural focus was cited by a small number of respondents.

Similar to the responses to Q17, the responses to this question illustrates a community that is extremely motivated and keen for more art and cultural opportunities in their local area and want this to be put in place by ACW/MNW and other relevant players in this landscape.

5. Recommendations

Overall, we believe the case for change regarding Wales' approach to art and culture in rural disadvantaged communities is strongly evidenced in the findings of this study. We also believe that the findings strongly reflect a desire and a need for a change of approach to one rooted in the theory and practice of Cultural Democracy. Art and culture are by its very nature rich and diverse, however, the definition of what is art and culture is often limited to what is accepted and generated by the art and culture establishment and then reflected within the media and political processes. Working to the principles of Cultural Democracy will by necessity widen this definition resulting in a more inclusive approach to interventions in the art and culture landscape.

ACW and NMW should follow the lead of Welsh Government and work to the mantra of 'Build Back Fairer'. This includes an examination of how existing policies and practices work against the principles of Cultural Democracy.

There are many publications available that detail the theory and practice of cultural democracy, so for the sake of brevity, we won't reproduce them in this report.

1. Adopt Cultural Democracy in both theory and practice

Cultural Democracy is not a new idea and is readily supported by many people in the art and culture sector, however, we don't believe it has been universally adopted in practice, particularly in regards to funding structure and decisions. We do not underestimate how difficult this could be to implement as organisational culture change is never easy, but is required.

2. Create structure through which Cultural Democracy can be delivered.

If this model of working is to be adopted, structures do need to be created. It could be done through creating community led advisory boards or people's panels. These boards should be made up of people from the communities to ensure openness and transparency and to allow these same communities to be part of all decision-making processes, ensuring community needs and desires are fully reflected in all areas of work. These panels or boards will have the added bonus of acting as ambassadors of ACW and NMW bringing knowledge of them and their activities into the heart of communities.

3. Create a community of interest.

There are already many art and culture groups within the study location, and here we also include educational settings. Bringing these groups together into a community of interest, will assist a cohesive and democratic approach to their development into whatever direction they wish. Good practice can be shared as well as creating the landscape for co-production and collaboration.

4. Improve the name recognition of ACW and NMW.

While the low level of name recognition may not be crucial in itself, as we don't believe it impacts on the viewing pleasures of an audience, however it may impact on people's opportunities within the art and cultural industry. Low awareness of funding bodies, coupled with little personal connections to people working in these fields, may well impact on people's knowledge and ability to seek funding and opportunities, creating an opportunity gap between cities, the middle class and rural disadvantaged communities.

5. Encourage local art and culture providers to more closely align their activities with the wants and desires of their local community

When comparing the reported art and culture activities partaken by respondents, to their stated desires of what they wanted put on locally, there was a large and stark disconnect. The locally provided art and culture activities, do not line up with reported local aspiration, meaning local venues are not or can't respond to local needs.

The data would indicate the very high disconnect between the stated desires of people, and their local art and culture offer, may be a driver for the very high reported disengagement between people and what is locally provided.

Taking a Cultural Democracy approach will by its nature address such issues.

6. Ensure there is a developed focus on Children and young people

Throughout the consultation responses, and especially in the two closing questions, respondents wanted a clear focus on the art and cultural aspirations of children and young people. Most of the comments were angled towards art and culture while others were more in the realm of community cohesion. Colstars were consistently namechecked and supported by the respondents. Their community reach was very high with their name recognition being much higher than both ACW and NMW.

7. Rebuilding community cohesion in a post Covid world

Many older people feel isolated and fear that their pre Covid bonds to their community may be permanently broken. It was suggested that art and culture could be a means to rebuild lost connections. Intergenerational work was also suggested, especially in nursing homes where people have been isolated for a year. Work could include projects that collect life stories from the large older population in the area. They are generally disconnected from arts and culture, so making a performance and or exhibition which puts their lives at the centre would have much value and could help create their inclusion into arts and culture in an accessible way.

8. Cultural democracy in a post Covid world.

This is a perfect opportunity to use the principles and practices of cultural democracy, embracing the opportunities that creativity and culture play in securing local economies and talent.

Understanding the role of the arts and cultural scenes in helping build and sustain communities, improving health and wellbeing and supporting and promoting opportunities for our children and young people, should be the foundation of the work of ACW and NMW when navigating what inevitably will be a challenging post Covid 19 world.