

Senedd Cymru / Welsh Parliament

Pwyllgor Diwylliant, y Gymraeg a Chyfathrebu / Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee

Ymchwiliad i'r achosion o COVID-19 ac effaith y feirws ar ddiwylliant, y diwydiannau creadigol, treftadaeth, cyfathrebu a chwaraeon / Inquiry into the COVID-19 outbreak and its impact on culture, creative industries, heritage, communications and sport

CWLC COV43

Ymateb gan Celfyddydau Gwirfoddol Cymru / Response from Voluntary Arts Wales



**Voluntary Arts Wales**  
**Celfyddydau Gwirfoddol Cymru**

## **Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee**

### **Inquiry into the COVID-19 outbreak and its impact on culture, creative industries, heritage, communications and sport**

#### ***A response from Voluntary Arts Wales***

#### **Voluntary Arts Wales**

Voluntary Arts Wales (VAW) is part of Voluntary Arts: a national charitable company established in 1991 that operates in a devolved structure throughout the UK and Republic of Ireland, promoting and championing participation in creative cultural activity in all its forms. VAW is an elected member of the Third Sector Partnership Council (TSPC), representing volunteer-led arts groups and organisations throughout Wales.

#### **Overview of the sector**

The voluntary arts and culture sector in Wales is extensive, and includes choirs, brass bands, knitting groups, craft clubs, theatre groups, festivals, folk dancing, dyeing and weaving, quilting, sculpting and painting, and many more artforms. Welsh Government estimates that there are around 4,000 amateur arts, culture and heritage groups in Wales. Information from the Wales Council for Voluntary Action's *All Wales Third Sector Database* puts the figure at 3,233 – but it is likely that many more informal and unconstituted groups add to this number. The sector contributes a huge amount to the cultural and civic life of Wales, as well as helping to improve wellbeing and social connectedness, and addressing social exclusion.

It is difficult, at this stage, to gauge the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the sector as a whole. Voluntary Arts is planning a 'state of the sector' survey in September 2020, where we hope to be able to gauge the mood and state of voluntary and community arts groups across the nation. Despite numerous challenges, typically the voluntary arts sector is characterised by optimism and resilience, and we will be able to compare statistics from previous years with the current position.

Voluntary creative groups are of course part of the wider arts sector and wider civil society, and the impact of the pandemic on other parts of the cultural sector will be felt right across the arts ecology. We want to commend the Arts Council of Wales for their swift and considered response to funding support.

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We know that the majority of the groups in the voluntary arts sector are small, local (84% of the total figure, according to WCVA statistics) and rarely in receipt of public funds. Many either charge a small membership fee or exist on a purely voluntary basis. In 2018, we estimated that the average contribution of time by volunteers in creative groups was 6.3 hours per week. Our understanding is that some groups that can't meet in person are simply in abeyance during lockdown, with the exception of online committee meetings.

But where possible, many voluntary arts groups have transferred their activities online: choir singalongs; pre-recorded or live demonstrations of visual arts and crafts; creative challenges on social media etc. Where online access is unavailable or problematic, groups have maintained contact and creative activity via post, telephone trees and local radio. Voluntary Arts and cultural partners including BBC Arts and the Arts Councils across the UK have been promoting Get Creative at Home as a showcase of creative activities that people can take part in from home. The website now lists 740 activities available to anyone across the UK. Recent funding from the Arts Council of Wales has enabled VAW to offer micro-grants of £250 to smaller groups (and those not part of Arts Portfolio Wales) to support creative projects.

We have seen people look to creative activity during lockdown. We have long advocated for the benefits of creative cultural activity for maintaining health and wellbeing, and improving mood. But it is clear that during difficult times, creative activity is vitally important as a coping mechanism, a way of retaining a sense of normality and maintaining a degree of connection with others in the community.

A particularly pressing issue is the reopening of venues for creative activity. The venues used by creative groups will be varied and come from across the public, private and third sectors, e.g. public libraries, schools, pub functions rooms, church halls and community centres. It is likely that these different venues will be subject to different guidelines and different levels of availability. Groups will want to ensure that activities are safe and conform to appropriate social distancing requirements; entry requirements (e.g. excluding people who are displaying symptoms); cleaning standards and frequency; risk assessment etc.

We know that many groups are considering outdoor creative sessions as a means of mitigating risk of contact and exposure. There will also be large numbers of groups where some members will continue to shield when lockdown eases. Similarly to educational settings, these are exploring 'blended' approaches to practicing creativity together: some in-person activity alongside live-streamed or video-linked capabilities.

Voluntary arts groups provide vital social support and will have an important role to play in rebuilding social cohesion and improving community wellbeing following lockdown. These groups depend on the availability of appropriate venues to meet, practice, rehearse and perform. Clear, consistent guidance about the reopening and use of venues would be extremely helpful.

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**Voluntary Arts Wales**

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