



The Petitions Committee
Welsh Government
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff CF99 1NA

Petition to Protect the Future of Youth Music in Wales

Response to Huw Lewis' letter dated 9th February 2016

Thank you for once again allowing us the chance to comment on the response from the ministers letter, we are grateful that we are able to have a voice that is hopefully being heard by the Assembly.

It is possible to trace back the history of instrumental music for about 7000 years, to the point where instruments being created were able to play tunefully. As music was being created and developed, the musician would pass on their knowledge and experience to those they were teaching, allowing them to take what they had learned and encourage their student to develop their own skills further. This type of mentorship led to the creation of highly regarded and widely recognised compositions still being performed hundreds of years later. This form of teaching is the same used today by the already established music services around Wales. A system that has worked for thousands of years should be protected and expanded on, not dismissed and replaced by the latest, untested educational program ideas - Thus the purpose of our petition!

There are a few points we would like to raise regarding the minister's letter:

1. We believe that the Minister has possibly misconstrued the "raison d'être" for this whole campaign. Music Services are, indeed, the responsibility of LAs. The level of commitment from LAs varies widely with a number showing little support for such services. (Our own parents and children were recently involved in a very prestigious concert which was a result of an ongoing collaboration between four authorities – something which the Minister is keen to develop). Not one Director of Education attended! It seems that Music is becoming the first port of call when authority cuts have to be made. This petition was set up in order to try and stem the haemorrhaging of musicians and protect services and, more importantly, the opportunities for all our young people. This is the one aspect that appears to have been ignored. The main reason that things have survived for so long is down to the dedication of very committed and experienced staff. They are now leaving the profession in droves and most feel totally demoralised. We fail to see that removal of experience is a recipe for driving up standards, although it will fit the austerity agenda.
2. We applaud the setting up of new initiatives that expand on what music services currently provide, but question whether a two year programme is, first of all, the most efficient way to spend such a great financial resource. The amounts mentioned in the Minister's letter suggest more than enough money to run the current system for the whole of Wales for a

number of years. What happens at the end of the two year period? Does it suddenly end? Experience has shown that the removal and reduction in numbers of peripatetic teachers has already decimated levels of provision and attainment. Could that not happen when the so-called experts leave after two years? Will future groups be denied a similar grounding in creative development? Allowing for the fact that part of this initiative is to train others in future delivery, what mechanisms will be in place to ensure that future generations of pupils will have the same standard of delivery and the same opportunities as those pupils targeted over the two year development period? Something needs to be built in to ensure the continuation of high level practice.

3. The remodelling of the management of the national ensembles is, in many ways, a positive move in that it will remove the anomalies which currently exist, possibly reduce unnecessary costs and remove the duplication of roles. Management is not the root of the problem, however, as this undoubtedly stems from the systematic dissolution of provision in schools. The more affluent will always be able to have lessons. The LAs will support the very poorest families. It is the middle ground where no support is offered which suffers the greatest. Instruments and lessons, coupled with fees for membership of ensembles and residential experiences, when appropriate, add up to many hundreds or even thousands of pounds for such families when they have several children involved – quite a common feature. These are the families that have to prioritise and make the decisions as to whether or not to continue with musical activities. These are the pupils who no longer take part. Anecdotal evidence shows a great reduction in the number of pupils taking part in ensemble work in areas where charging has been introduced. This is where the national problems are born. Smaller numbers mean less pupils achieve. We understand the issue of fee charging in principal, although suspect that certain members of the Task and Finish group may not have fully understand the consequences as they have no direct dealings with Music services. Are similar fees payable for sporting activities and other similar projects? It must also be taken into account that at least a third of the marks awarded at GCSE, AS and A level in music come from the work encountered in instrumental lessons. Are there other National Curriculum subjects where charges are made for lessons?
4. Music services in Wales were encouraged or coerced into handing over their previously centrally-held budgets to schools. It is primarily the support from a majority of schools which has kept the system afloat for many years by using that money to buy back the service. The diversion of that funding in some schools into a cheaper provision or even into different subject areas is now becoming more commonplace. The ring-fenced element of our petition was to ensure that this no longer happened. We urgently ask that this still becomes the case.

In closing, as you should be aware, the news over the last couple of weeks has been reporting on the consideration of Swansea County Borough Council to close its music service. As we are nearly a year on from our petition's submission and have been informed of the Welsh Governments various "future" ideas and considerations, with no definitive decisions been made yet, we therefore plead with you to act quickly before we have no instrumental music services left to protect!

Yours sincerely,



Matthew Goss
Chairman of The Friends of Bridgend Youth Music