

# "Imagine"

Our vision for the arts in Wales



Arts Council of Wales  
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Rabab Ghazoul - *Can't Keep Up With Keeping You Down* (photo: David Winwood)

## Arts Council of Wales

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## Imagine...

Imagine Wales. And when you've done that – pictured it, heard it, enjoyed it, read about it, celebrated it – try to think of our country without song, the spoken word on stage and screen, without poetry and novels, and dance and sculptures and ceramics and paintings and images, and all of the living traditions that are making our contemporary culture so potentially dynamic. In raw fact, as well as in our imagination, there's no human Wales without Art, just as there's no Heritage to pass on generation by generation without Creativity.

So think about what makes the arts special to you. Remember those thrilling moments of rapture, joy, surprise – that fleeting instant so magical and affecting that whether you realise it or not, it lies embedded anchor deep in your memory for a lifetime. Nothing else has quite the same effect. It's why the arts matter, and why we think they're worth fighting for.

We're ambitious for the arts in Wales. Our vision is of a creative Wales where the arts are central to the life of the nation, a place where our best talents are revealed, nurtured and shared. So our vision looks to the future of what the arts in Wales could be. It's about creative ambition, human possibility. It's not about the detail – there's plenty of that elsewhere. Instead we're taking the long view, looking to where we could be, ten or more years from today.

But there'll be no Wales to imagine afresh tomorrow if we don't properly support the Arts in the here and now. We believe that the arts should be an absolute priority for the Senedd and the Government of Wales. And in these testing times, the relatively small sum currently committed to the Arts should be enhanced, not in despite of but precisely because of the current economic buffeting.

How you tack with the wind rather than against it is the way to steer the course ahead. So we move forward with confidence and conviction. We talk of the things we believe in and the things we want to do. We talk of emphasis and inflection, of broadly defined priorities and goals. We do so in ways that we hope will be welcoming and inclusive, drawing closer those who might share, support and indeed help shape our vision. Because if we do, then just imagine what could be done. Just imagine the Wales, with a little courage, we could then go on to create.

## You, us or them?

Who's the "we" that we keep talking about?

This is Council's vision. But we'd like to think that the "we" is everyone in Wales who has a passion for the arts: artists, organisations, audiences, sponsors, government (local and national), the Arts Council itself.

This statement of our vision coincides – intentionally – with our Investment Review. The Investment Review is the most far reaching examination of the publicly funded arts that the Arts Council has undertaken in recent years. We want to emerge from the process with a 'portfolio' of organisations who are artistically vibrant, financially durable and with a level of investment which will enable them to thrive. These are the organisations that will be at the heart of the Arts Council's future strategy to develop the arts in Wales.

So while our vision is, to an extent, boundless, where we choose to invest will be more selective.

It's about making choices. We won't rip up in devil may care fashion the things that work and that we know are of value. But if need be, we're prepared to take bold and even unpopular funding decisions to support what we believe in.

## Determined to be better

We're about development. The arts change and grow – our funding must reflect that. So if our vision does nothing else, it must signal that we expect the future of the arts in our country to look, and feel, very different. And by different we mean better.

'Improvement' is the new *lingua franca*. Across all fields of political and civic life in Wales there's a determination to be better, do better – and to do it all at reduced cost. Heard it all before? That doesn't mean it's not right, or that we're not going to be pressed hard to deliver the goods. We all need to play our part, raise our game. Are we good enough? How can we excel? What will persuade government to see the arts as a priority when there are so many other causes clamouring for attention? Can we really afford not to be better?

We're not interested in the dull or the mediocre. Why would we be?

We don't expect every artist that we fund to have the good grace always to produce a work of genius. But we do hope that the artist will do more than engage only in indulgent self expression. We look to our artists to refine that expression through craft, imagination, patience and dedication, helping us to explore the best and deepest parts of ourselves.

Everyone's got an opinion about what is, and isn't, 'good' art.

We know, too, that our perceptions of quality are subjective, influenced as they are by our experience, knowledge and taste. In the absence of ready made universal truths, it's often easier to say "I like this better than that" rather than to define what's of 'quality' or 'excellence'. In the end, our perception of 'the best' isn't only subjective, it's also relative.

Still...

It mustn't mean that we surrender our search to understand a little better those characteristics in the arts that affect and touch us most deeply. After all, Art that's conceived with passion and imagination, Art that's well crafted and produced, and which reaches out and touches us – such Art is authentic, distinctive and important. That spine tingling moment, once felt, is never forgotten. Quality matters, at all times, and in every way.

## A life less ordinary...

When Raymond Williams famously said in 1958 "Culture is Ordinary", he immediately added "and that is where we must start." His intention remains exemplary: that there's nothing mysterious or exclusive about a whole society's need to share and participate in cultural achievements. Equally, societies that progress rather than wither on the bough eventually re-seed, re-direct and grow anew through all their arts.

As a public institution we often face the criticism that we lean too much towards old fashioned conservatism on the one hand, and an impetuous embrace of 'the new' on the other. The reality is more subtle.

It's nearly always easier to look backwards rather than forwards. But our cultural heritage can be a nostalgic fixative if we don't, always, remember that its true worth derives from the creativity that made it afresh.

Since the beginning of time, artists have reflected, questioned and shaped the way that culture and society have developed. The traditions that are now the cornerstones of our cultural heritage were new and challenging in their time. Much of this work still has a relevance that resonates today. But work that's of its time has a particular immediacy. The contemporary, the living and the dangerously ephemeral must, then, be the primary driver of our vision for the arts.

So we won't be afraid, when it's right, to take a few risks. And we'll expect those who we invest in to do the same – not haphazardly or irresponsibly, but knowingly and confidently, equipped with our best instincts, knowledge and expertise. Our vision of the future depends on it. Because if we push beyond our comfort zones, with courage and curiosity, we might just bring into sharper focus Art that is different, challenging, and perhaps more interesting.

## Recognising the world we live in...

As the song says, "it's a wonderful, wonderful world". But for all of the fuss and fanfare of our move into the 21st century, how much do we really know about the people and the cultures around us? Do we appreciate the beauty and grace of other cultures, those manifestations of wisdom and expression that are new or unfamiliar, or lie just beyond our grasp?

The arts help us to understand difference. But they also help us to explore and articulate our common humanity, our place in the world. They help us to express what's distinctive and singular, but also what unites and binds us together.

Wales is changing, and changing fast. Our major towns and cities are growing fast, but so too is the danger that our rural communities will become isolated or disconnected from the urban centres of cultural provision. Our population is ageing. And as people live longer, their interests, their health and their income will all have an impact on how they enjoy and take part in the arts.

A generous, fair minded and tolerant society values and respects the creativity of all its citizens.

It's a society that embraces equality and celebrates difference, wherever it's found in race, gender, sexuality, age or disability. There's so much that can enrich and expand our culture.

The disabled artist, for example, whose lived experience of society's response to their disability can reveal unique, sometimes disturbing, insights that are artistically and culturally significant; the dub poet whose dissonant but eloquent voice speaks of different truths and forces us to look afresh at the world through different eyes.

Almost inevitably, perhaps, public funding reflects the patterns of what has been, rather than what should be. In a fragile funding environment, the strength of existing institutions can appear to be an obstacle. In spite of the creativity and energy that exists, the Arts Council has managed to revenue fund very few arts organisations that are rooted in Wales's black and ethnic minority communities.

Perhaps it's the models of support themselves that are wrong. Whatever the reason, we need to put this right: by listening, talking, and discussing the steps we need to take – and the investment we must make – to initiate real, durable change.

Our vision, then, is of a future where our funding strategy more fully reflects the cultural realities of 21st century Wales. And if we're to create a culture that values difference and diversity, we'll need to underline that box ticking and lip service are the enemies – honesty, with tolerance and achievable aspiration, are our allies.



## Our language, our voice

One of the obvious ways we express ourselves is through the words and the language that we use.

We're a bi-lingual nation – legally, socially, culturally, and as individuals and communities. Nothing makes Wales more distinctive than the Welsh Language. The language provides the means to understand and enjoy an extraordinarily rich literature and culture. The Arts thrive on this and are a key component in continuing the Welsh language's vital role at the heart of Welsh life.

But we need also to defend vigorously the right of people to explore their own culture, their own creativity through the language of their choice, whether as consumer, participant or artist.

In an increasingly globalised world, we see the Welsh language, alongside English, as a basic civic attribute as well as an inherited culture. If it's to flourish and grow, the Welsh language and culture will themselves have to offer the same levels of experimentation and responsiveness to global trends as its anglophile cousin. The vitality and originality of the arts in Wales depends on the fresh flow of new ideas – new thinking that's conceived, developed and shared through the medium of Welsh.

Our vision embraces the fact that this bi-lingual Wales is an archipelago of differentiation. We're many 'Wales', culturally, geographically, economically and linguistically. Overall unity doesn't stem from the isolated happenstances of landfall, but from the fluidity of connections that shape the nation's landscape generation by generation.

If Art can capture this more than any other human activity, then the possession and extension of Welsh serves as a key to unlock the connective meaning. We need to unfold a bolder strategy for this unique aspect of our cultural life, and with Government and the Welsh Language Board explore how this lead can act to connect the several 'Wales' that actually exist.

## Always the artist

Our Investment Review is mostly about organisations rather than artists. But pause for a moment to ask the pertinent questions: who writes the poem, composes the music, acts the play, directs the opera, sings the song, dances the line, dreams the novel, sketches the drawing, shapes the pot, designs the city?

Artists, not institutions, create art.

It's the artist, addressing the world in its hopes and disasters, in its changes and disruption, who reinvents cultural expression appropriate for the times. Today's young artist, for example, is likely to be equally comfortable working across a wide range of creative disciplines, moving

seamlessly between the subsidised and the commercial, engaging with contemporary issues that lie beyond the traditional borders of the arts: science, technology, health, ecology – the pressing, difficult, issues of our time. Many of these artists will want to work in an interdisciplinary way, positioning their work within the wider context of the creative industries. They'll often be the trail blazers, the pioneers, the new entrepreneurs who'll create jobs and investment for others.

In the past, our direct involvement with individual artists has sometimes felt too partial, limited to those who simply couldn't be ignored, either because of the undeniable quality of their work or through sheer persistence. However, the majority of artists who fall into neither category could be forgiven for feeling ignored or under appreciated.

Our vision for the future puts the artist to the fore.

Whether in the cradling embrace of another organisation or alone in the studio, the individual artist is the primary agent of artistic creation everywhere. So we want to see more opportunities for the artist to have the time, the space and the resources with which to develop their work. And over time, we'll direct more funding to artists, the act of creation and the partnerships that make new work possible.

## A time to play...

From our earliest years we learn through play. As we put aside our childhood things, we simply find new things to take their place – more sophisticated toys and materials, more complex rules. And even if we don't actually want to do things ourselves, we're fascinated by watching others doing them, or enjoying what they've done.

To play is to engage in the first steps of creative and artistic activity. It's a journey that can transform the way children and young people learn and explore the world around them. It can change the way they see themselves – even what they dream of for the future – as well as helping them to develop life skills for the future.

The arts can nurture a young person's ability to question and make connections, to develop the capacity for independent, critical thought. They can inspire young people with new ambition and confidence, challenging poverty of aspiration and breaking the cycle of deprivation caused by low educational achievement. It can be the key that unlocks the door to further and higher education, and in time employment.

But we must start at the beginning.

We whole heartedly support the Welsh Assembly Government's important initiative to develop foundation phase education. This genuinely distinctive policy has the potential to revolutionise the way our youngest children learn through play. It's a radical approach, but one that's ideally suited to the arts. We must all play our role in making foundation schools a success.



We must also follow through.

We know that as children get older, they make their own choices about how, and in what ways, they engage with the arts. This is the moment when everything can change. Between the ages of 9 and 14 experience tells us that young people's exposure to the arts in schools lessens. So as they begin to explore their own interests, their own creativity, their own talent, it's more important than ever that they have the right opportunities to experience high quality arts in as many different ways as possible.

Our vision, then, is of a future in which high quality arts education becomes an everyday fact of life in our schools and colleges. To see artists and arts organisations working in schools will be typical, not exceptional. The radicalism that's transforming learning for the very young will continue, in an unbroken chain, throughout that young person's school career. Schools will be the compelling, engaging heart of their communities, recognised and 'accredited' for the quality of their creative education.

This isn't entirely the picture we'd recognise today. So we believe that there's merit – with our partners in national and local government – in taking a detailed and careful look at the health of the arts in our schools, examining how young people experience the arts in and out of formal education. We need to learn from what is happening well, and develop sensible, practical ways of spreading this knowledge more widely across our schools.

## More than just the "X Factor"...

Talent – imagined, perceived, and sometimes even real – it's today's common currency. Whether it's the must-see clip on You Tube, or the latest "look at me" celebrity on reality TV, everyone's jostling for their 15 minutes of fame (deserved or not).

Real talent is hard to define, but easy to spot. By and large you know it when you see it. But next comes the hard bit. How do you create the right environment where the creative spark can ignite and come alive? Sometimes, the opportunity to take part in the arts – at a theatre, in a club, at school, in the local church hall, the community centre – will be enough to fan the flame. But there'll always be those who want to go further, dig deeper.

So we want to see more attention given to young people learning through the experience of doing, inspired by the opportunity to work alongside our professional artists and arts organisations. We want every young person in Wales to believe that the opportunity is there for them to be the best they can – or want – to be, performing with their peers at the highest level, showcasing their talents to the people of Wales and abroad.

If we're to succeed, we need to get better at putting the arts where they can really make a difference. This means trying harder to reach out to those young people who, for whatever reason, face economic or social barriers. It can't be right that opportunities to learn or train

through the arts are so unevenly and inconsistently spread across Wales. Educational opportunity should never depend on a young person's family background, or on where they live.

We've made an encouraging start. Many of the arts organisations that we currently fund are actively working in *Communities First* areas spread across some of the most deprived and disadvantaged communities in Wales. But we're only scratching the surface. We need to think harder, reach deeper.

What about those youngsters who've become disillusioned and disengaged from the formal civic structures that are supposedly there to help them? We can't just let them slip through the net. So under the banner of the European funded *Reach the Heights* programme, we'll be exploring new ways of offering a helping hand to disenfranchised young people, encouraging them to find their way back into education and training. We believe that this will become an increasingly important part of our work.

But what then?

Despite the fact that the arts and creative industries are among the UK's fastest growing sectors, young people are still finding it tough to break into professional employment. Using personal contacts or taking unpaid voluntary work can sometimes be the only way of getting a foot in the door.

Across all sections of industry, the concept of the apprenticeship is re-emerging as an effective way of making a start and learning a craft. It's an approach that's being vigorously promoted by our colleagues at Creative and Cultural Skills.

If it works, it could be "win, win" all round – the arts need the reinvigoration of new energy and ideas, and young people need the chance to get onto that first rung of the career ladder. So our vision is of a forward looking arts industry in Wales, committed to investing in its future skills – whether it's artistic or technical, managerial or administrative, we are acting now to create the next generation of artists and leaders who'll keep the arts alive for tomorrow.

## Arts for all

Wales has a rich legacy of the creativity that's been supported, and culture that's been achieved, by the efforts of earlier generations of extraordinary people. For them, culture was, indeed, ordinary.

We shouldn't be burdened by that cultural history of Workmen's Libraries, Miners' Institutes and Village Halls that echoed with word and song all over rural and industrial Wales. On the contrary. We should be inspired by their 20th century aspirations, but determined to find the new forms of artistic engagement and expression appropriate to today. A do nothing or

'wait and see' stance is not acceptable to a Wales that needs to move on by releasing the pent up creativities of communities and consumers.

For many people, 'doing' is as important as 'seeing' – sometimes more so.

Amateurs and volunteers are as much part of the cultural DNA of Wales as our award winning artists and national companies. Much of their activity is unfunded, has its own structures and economy – it's largely the business of no one else other than those who choose to use their leisure time in this way. By and large this won't be an area of Arts Council priority, but we need to be careful.

A heavy handed emphasis on clear cut distinctions between amateur and professional can in some cases be culturally irrelevant, even damaging to emerging arts practice. We need also to recognise that volunteers and amateurs sometimes underpin the professional activity that we most value.

So where does the Arts Council fit in?

Though the arts is something that all people can 'do', this doesn't mean that everyone can do it well. Every person can be creative, and we should defend to the hilt their entitlement to take part in, and enjoy, the arts. But this no more means that everyone is an artist any more than we assume that every physically active person is an athlete, or every person able to administer first aid a surgeon, or every person able to lift a frying pan a chef. Quality, again.

We can all learn from and appreciate those whose excellence in these matters is paramount. One of the ways that this can happen is through people's involvement in community arts.

In Wales, the best community arts activity has a strong and distinct character. For us, it's about change, authorship and ownership – that remarkable ability of the skilled arts professional to work alongside individuals and communities, finding their voice, unlocking a new dimension of experience that would otherwise have remained unused and undiscovered. This is what we're interested in. Work which empowers and connects – work which is unique, authentic and life affirming, work which at its best is genuinely transformational.

## 'National' in name and deed

21<sup>st</sup> century Wales is itself a paradox: an old country growing younger. That's to say that most of the touchstones of Welsh historical identity have, over the last century, either disappeared or teetered on the edge. Yet institutions of and in Welsh society have, over the same period, been created, developed and sustained, from the National Museum to the Welsh Rugby Union to the Senedd itself.

National arts institutions in Wales aren't the encumbrances of some kind of fanciful 19<sup>th</sup> century

state building. They are themselves the building blocks of a civic society which is the only future available to a Wales where past history has been one of fragmentation.

National organisations are important. They matter in and of themselves, but also for what they signify. We might regret that it's so, but for many people – especially those outside Wales – the reputation of our national organisations is a barometer of the strength and vibrancy of our country's arts.

To be 'national' is a privilege, not an assumed right.

It's a designation that can be contested and contestable, depending on the endorsement of the civic, political and cultural authorities of the day. It brings with it a particular obligation to be an exemplar in every way: creating work of national and international significance; showing leadership in developing the arts in Wales; nurturing the partnerships and relationships that will develop new artists; building the arts audiences of the future. This is a big responsibility.

We want our national organisations to achieve the highest artistic standards. We want them to succeed, nationally and internationally. We also want them to think carefully about the nature of their umbilical relationship with Wales, the tap-root to that native talent that, in some cases, gave birth to the organisation itself. Being able to articulate this relationship in a compelling and engaging fashion helps us all to be local, national and international.

## Closer to home

We demand national cultural institutions that can stand side by side with their peers in the UK and internationally. We're right to do so. But we also want the arts to be available closer to home.

Wales has a remarkable network of arts buildings. From the largest to the smallest, they're those all-important 'pins on the map' in their locality, keeping the arts alive across the length and breadth of Wales. Communities benefit from having access to creative spaces where they can enjoy and take part in arts activities. These spaces – theatres, arts centres, galleries, churches, village halls – are often at the heart of the community.

Over decades, civic pride, artistic ambition, community consciousness have all contributed to the arts buildings that have sprung up all over Wales. Whether it's a city council building a new concert hall, an amateur drama society with its own theatre, or a local community group with its own centre, most of our arts buildings exist because people wanted them enough to make them happen. The question now is whether they want them enough to meet the cost of keeping them open.

Instinctively, the answer has to be "yes", but it's to the public funders – the Arts Council, local authorities, universities, the BBC – that people now turn. While we might campaign for

additional funds, we can't ignore the realities – the Arts Council's investment is simply spread too thinly. If we carry on and do nothing, the quality and diversity of the arts in Wales will suffer.

This isn't a new challenge. We've been facing it for years, using ever more ingenious 'work arounds' to mitigate the difficulties. And there's the rub. Additional money from the Welsh Assembly Government (*Arts Outside Cardiff* and *Beacon* funding) has kept things ticking along. In fact it's done more than that, encouraging genuine, new innovation. But it's also provided a distraction from the underlying problems. While the fortunes of some have improved, at least for the time being, it's been at the expense of others who are already struggling to keep their heads above water.

It's been suggested that arts buildings in Wales form an arterial network that sustains the 'body creative' that is Wales. It's an attractive metaphor. But the arteries thicken and the lifeblood flows with less vigour if the principal organs falter and lose their strength.

This is why, within the performing arts, we've already highlighted a defined network of venues as regionally significant; and in the visual arts we've designated galleries as priorities for development. It's an approach that hasn't been universally popular. But overall, we feel it's a strategy that makes sense, not least when seen within the context of the Welsh Assembly Government's *Spatial Strategy*. So for the next five years at least, this will continue to be our approach.

Buildings are sometimes seen as secondary to the work that takes place in them. This needs to change.

Buildings can be important cultural agents, for both artists and the public. The distinctions between producer, curator, promoter and exhibitor are becoming increasingly blurred. We welcome this.

Our vision envisages an approach that builds on existing, acknowledged expertise, and creates strategically located 'hubs' – a strong, confident network of regionally significant arts centres and buildings with resources to match.

These organisations would have a leadership role – important in their own right, but strategically significant in terms of the wider arts development role they'd play. Promoting diverse programmes of high quality professional activity, these organisations would have the flexibility to commission and curate new work, exploit this work (through touring or co-commissioning), and provide the space, opportunities and services that would help artists to develop and grow their work.

These would be organisations who are arts led, but audience focused, drawing people to work of high quality, creating a rapport between artist and audience. They'd play to their strengths and their specialism, but they'd also co-ordinate the development of partner 'clusters', geographically or according to their artform specialism.

There could well be issues here for our use of Lottery funds.

We have to move forward in the expectation that those arts buildings at the heart of our future strategy either are, or can be, fit for purpose and ecologically sound – quality facilities of the highest standard. In spite of the recessionary pressures, we shouldn't shy away from the need to maintain a high quality building stock. But given the pressures on Lottery funds this won't be easy to achieve. Success will increasingly depend on the willingness of a range of funding partners to coalesce around a single capital strategy. The next phase of our Lottery capital strategy – which we'll publish next year – will explore how we do this.

## Joining the dots

Every town might want its own funded arts group or centre for the arts, but providing universal equal access to the arts is impossible. That said, how close can we get?

Our *Night Out* scheme is extremely successful in bringing high quality arts programming to the most local of communities. It works. So we'll increase resources for this important part of our audience development strategy.

However, there's one obvious consequence of concentrating greater funding on a smaller number of regionally significant organisations – those who are less fortunate might have to reduce their programmes, or even close. The closure of any arts organisation is a tragedy. So how can we avoid a situation that sees the lights going off across Wales?

A lot will depend on getting every pound of public investment to stretch as far it can.

We want to encourage arts organisations to look more imaginatively at how they can work more closely together. In our view, the successful arts company of the future will be one that's agile, networked and fleet of foot; collaborating on shared facilities, joint commissioning and saving money by outsourcing administrative functions where it's cost effective to do so. There's no single prescription for what does, and doesn't, work, but it's important that arts organisations explore for themselves what might be possible.

## More than bricks and mortar...

Not every type of arts activity takes place in a building.

To date, our policies have tended to favour the building based company or venue. Yet other types of art – public art, site specific, carnival, street theatre, circus, festivals – can sometimes be the place where art is reinvented and reinvigorated.

These artforms often bring together music, design, crafts and choreography. They're a ripe testing ground for innovation and experimentation. They can act as a catalyst to bring



communities together, they can celebrate identity and diversity. But many of these organisations would probably feel that they're pushed to the margins of our sphere of interest. We want this to change.

A vibrant, exciting, and dynamic culture thrives on the new, the spectacular, the surprising – work which reaches out and grabs a new and different audience. Provided that this work is compelling and of quality, it will attract our support. We operate no hierarchy of artforms – we're interested only in what's good.

We're especially keen to take a fresh look at Festivals.

The concept of the Festival is largely a Western European invention although it has its origins in the ancient Greek traditions of religious, ritual and cultural celebration. That greatest of all large scale festivals – the Greek Olympiad – attached as much importance to cultural achievement as it did to sporting prowess. This is why it's right that we should attach proper importance to the Cultural Olympiad in Wales and the legacy it'll leave behind.

Festivals are often very good at attracting people who wouldn't otherwise think of attending an arts event. They can encourage participation, a sense of community and civic pride. They can be important vehicles for economic regeneration. However, there are many examples of festivals that have become creatively stale – put together like a supermarket dash, their 'off the shelf' identikit events are neither distinctive nor original. A festival isn't anything in and of itself. It only exists because of what it contains. And a festival's identity, and worth, is defined by the quality and imagination of that content.

Our vision is of a cultural calendar in Wales that's punctuated by distinctive, exciting, world class Festival events. Something to get the pulse racing, something to look forward to.

We look to Festivals to surprise and enthral us, to offer programming beyond the common place and everyday. Perhaps it's an international dimension – it would certainly be the imagination to explore areas of the arts that lie outside the bounds of 'routine' programming.

Whatever their focus, Festivals would have character. They'd be places to meet, to exchange new ideas, to conjure up the unexpected, to celebrate. They'd be a testing ground: a place to explore new work and repertoire; the extraordinary flowering of creative synergy and surprise that can emerge from the unpredictable alchemy of bringing together the right 'mix' of creative individuals.

## “I spend, therefore I am...”

Whether we like it or not, we're becoming increasingly in thrall to technology. It's getting smaller, cheaper, more powerful, pervasive and personal. It's also becoming more interactive, and it's changing the way that people 'consume' art. The new buzzword is 'personalisation'.

Thanks to the web, we believe we can get whatever we want, whenever we want it, delivered direct to our door. We can shop at 8 in the evening, or 3 in the morning.

Fixed start time, tired auditorium, poor refreshments, no parking? You're competing with a level of customisation and personalisation on the web that you just can't beat. So it's essential that the arts offer the kind of convenience, flexibility and choice that people now have in other aspects of their lives.

If we don't respond to new patterns of consumer behaviour, we'll be left behind. In the face of an economic downturn, are we more likely to keep up the Sky subscription or go to the theatre?

When you can get culture on demand through You Tube and iTunes any time you want it (and at little or no apparent cost), you've got to ask what it'll mean in the future when we ask someone to pay £30 for a concert ticket when they've become accustomed to downloading on the internet for free.

The good news is that the power of the live experience still remains at the heart of many artforms. In our technology rich world, the live shared experience will become even more important. But expectations are high, and people are increasingly looking for a 'complete experience' that makes their visit to the theatre or gallery distinctive, satisfying and special. Nothing but the best.

## Getting ahead of the curve...

In trying to keep pace with technology, we've launched websites, installed on line ticketing, replaced hard mail subscription brochures with on-line e-marketing. And as we watch and learn from our children, we've come to recognise the internet not as a digital notice board, but as a social space. We've moved from communicating only through our own website to embrace MySpace, Facebook and Twitter. Yet nothing we do seems to be quite enough, quite fast enough and/or quite adequately resourced.

Technology is increasingly making it possible to create art and engage with it in new ways – a 'flat screen mediated' culture. This presents both opportunities and challenges for artists and arts organisations. The expectations of a generation that has grown up in a digital world are very different from those that preceded it. Low cost technology is offering new ways for the rapid exchange of views, ideas and content as well as new business models.

We're keen to explore how new technology can work better for the arts in Wales.

For example, if arts venues in Wales do form an arterial network, we might want to think more imaginatively about how that network could be better connected. One proposal that is currently taking shape explores the idea of digital interconnectivity to encourage virtual shared programming.

Live screenings beamed into Wales from London's National Theatre and the New York Met have already given a glimpse of what's possible. But what about the Wales Millennium Centre, or any number of other venues in Wales?

There's something here that deserves a closer look. We can see a real opportunity to create a virtual digital community who could initiate, support and share work across the length and breadth of Wales. An artistically driven, digitally connected *One Wales*.

## The creative industries...

The arts are important in their own right. But we also know that the creative and cultural industries are a vital engine for Wales' economy. They contribute directly in terms of jobs and the generation of wealth through the creation, distribution and retail of goods and services.

The dominant global companies of the past used to be concerned with industry and manufacturing. The key corporations of the future will be increasingly in the fields of communications, information, entertainment, science and technology. These require high degrees of creative imagination and entrepreneurial vision – qualities that the arts are ideally placed to provide.

Some parts of the cultural sector form significant tourism attractions, generating demand for transport, accommodation, catering and other tourism related business. They also help put Wales on the international map.

Given the scale and complexity of the creative industries, the appropriate point of public sector intervention isn't always clear. We certainly shouldn't be spending public money where it's not needed, where the market can sustain an activity without compromising its artistic integrity.

So instead we're interested in exploring three areas of activity: creative workspaces for individual artists and embryonic businesses; encouraging those who produce original content to gain the maximum commercial benefit from their investment; and, working with partners to establish appropriate mechanisms for providing training and business support.

We shouldn't, however, lose sight of the arts' position in the wider business economy.

It's hardly an auspicious moment, but we remain committed to doing everything we can to increase the money that's available for the arts in Wales. As well as the public funding that we receive through the Welsh Assembly Government and from the National Lottery, we've successfully secured funds from a variety of other sources. We'll continue with this work. And drawing on the expertise and knowledge of our colleagues at Arts and Business Cymru, we need to ensure that the arts are as 'business friendly' as they can be – making the connections, developing the partnerships, growing the arts economy.

## Small nation, big art...

A profile for Wales that isn't smudged by past clichés is an essential factor in taking Wales into the future as a vibrant and creative society. The arts don't only make Wales attractive and contemporary to ourselves, they make us distinctive and desirable in the eyes of others. Art produced in and of Wales – and achieved at the very highest standard – is the best promotion of the culture of today's Wales. They're our unique selling point in a world market that invests in future gilts not dusty heirlooms.

The excellence and creativity of Wales's arts contributes powerfully to the development of our cultural relations with the rest of the world. Many of Wales's arts organisations are internationally significant in their own right, and there's more to be done in developing their role as cultural ambassadors for Wales.

Wales is a devolved country within the UK and an expanded Europe. The Welsh Assembly Government has, and is, developing relationships internationally. Cultural and artistic components to these relations are important.

Developing the partnership between ourselves, the Welsh Assembly Government, Wales Arts International and the British Council will improve our support for artists and arts organisations who want to work internationally. We'll also attract activity into the country that broadens the knowledge of artists and arts audiences. Wales needs to be "open for business", getting stuck into the increasingly lucrative market in conferences, trade fairs and major events. We need to be competing internationally, winning these events for Wales.

## The Welsh Assembly Government

The Welsh Assembly Government is the Arts Council's principal financial sponsor. The Assembly Government's objective is to build a better Wales, and for that ambition to encompass the arts. We work to deliver this objective.

As an arts charity, we've a legal duty to develop and promote the arts to the best of our abilities. We can't be timid. We're expected to campaign for the funds that we believe the arts need to grow and flourish. We'll be determined and vigorous in presenting our case.

As an Assembly Government Sponsored Body we've a particular obligation to work positively and effectively to turn public policy into practical action. As an 'arm's length' organisation, we're committed to maintaining an accountable, respectful and dynamic relationship with the Welsh Assembly Government. And it's right that our independent decision making responsibilities should sit comfortably with the Government's proper need to have a clear view of how it wants to see taxpayers' money invested. We believe that Government, the public and the arts benefit from the expertise, authenticity and freedom of artistic expression that an arm's length body can provide.

The Welsh Assembly Government wants Wales to be fair, prosperous and confident, improving the quality of life of its people in all of the country's communities. The Arts should reflect this. Art will be a guide, a commentator, a critic, a persuader, a leader – because that's what the arts, at their best, can and must do.

The arts touch all aspects of the Welsh Assembly Government's cultural, economic and social agenda. We'll work closely with the Heritage Department to make sure that the benefits the arts can offer are woven across all relevant areas of the Assembly Government's activity. Our jointly conceived Arts & Health strategy has shown just what we can achieve, and we're developing new partnerships with cultural tourism and education. We'll extend this approach to include the creative industries, regeneration and climate change.

## Local government

The arts don't work in isolation, and neither do we.

Partnership between the Arts Council of Wales and local government is the foundation of the arts in Wales. Between us, we have the potential to touch the lives of everyone.

Councils bring their local knowledge, broad range of responsibilities, cultural development and their democratic representation. The Arts Council brings expertise in the arts and a national and international perspective on local issues.

The intrinsic value of the arts is now widely recognised. But the arts can also illuminate and give life to the wide range of strategies that underpin public life. From arts and health to cultural tourism, public art to town centre re-generation, the arts bring meaning, authenticity and joy to our everyday lives. Together, we create and sustain jobs, enrich education services, bring people together, improve our quality of life.

An important focus for our future work will be discussing with local authorities the Assembly Government's plans to introduce a Cultural Duty. We believe that this will help raise the profile of cultural activities and the role of local government in promoting and supporting them. There are also opportunities to encourage greater collaboration between local authorities, and between local authorities and ourselves.

As public bodies, we're all under huge financial pressure. This isn't going to change in the foreseeable future – if anything, it's going to get more intense. So it's even more important that we work together to grow where we can, and defend where we must.

Local authority and Arts Council priorities won't always coincide exactly. There's no reason why they should. But we have enough commonality of purpose to bring us closer together than has perhaps been our practice in the past. It's our intention, therefore, to explore with our local government colleagues if there are new ways of working that can get better value from our strategic relationship.

## Practising what we preach...

It's very important that arts organisations who receive public funding perform well. The same applies to us. Like any successful business, we need to develop our business strategy in the context of what's happening in the world around us.

We've a clear and effective strategy for delivering our work. We'll continue to monitor, evaluate and report on our performance, and make changes when necessary. We'll ensure that our decisions are informed by careful, accurate research. We'll be open and transparent in explaining how we manage our affairs, and how we report on our achievements.

We'll seek out operational cost savings through simplifying processes, utilising the best that technology can offer us, and by creating an environment where we habitually review the cost effectiveness of what we do. Our constant question has to be "what more can we do to maximise the levels of funding going directly to the arts?"

We're looking for a new, mature relationship with artists and arts organisations – one based on trust and mutual respect. We expect the key organisations that we fund to play a leadership role in terms of artistic innovation and audience development. We expect them to be well managed and governed. In return, we'll be more inclusive, inviting artists, arts organisations and advisers to work more closely with us on the development of policy and strategy. They represent a reservoir of knowledge and expertise that we'd be foolish to ignore.

We'll grow and develop our culture of being a citizen focused organisation, working for the public benefit, and building on the confidence of our stakeholders in our ability to deliver. Representation of the public interest will be seen in the composition of Council where, in so far as it's possible, the profile of the Welsh people will be reflected back by its members.

This means consideration, by ministerial appointment, of locality, gender, language, social class, ethnicity and disability as well as expertise in the arts, administration and governance. A passion for the arts will be the constant in each member's appointment. However, representation will also be about delivering a leadership in the arts. Our intent will be to keep open lines of communication between the arts sector that Council supports, and the public whom the Council serves.



## So now, imagine again...

Imagine the Wales we might create if together we do all this and more.

A Wales in which Art is understood as the meaning of Life. A Wales in which the survival mechanisms of a Welfare State – from Health, to Social Security to Education – are understood as only the means to allow human beings to thrive and to do that which singles out our animal nature as distinctive: the making of Art.

Imagine a Wales where citizens engage through art at many levels and continuously, with those moral and emotional issues with which the intellect and instinct are forever grappling.

Imagine a Wales whose democracy is enlivened by the ability of its people to envision themselves and their purposes, individual and social, in the collective delivery and consumption of art.

Imagine a Wales where the arts are central to our identity as a nation, making people want to visit us and know us. We need to be seen and to be known as ourselves if we're to be successful in all the ways which an increasingly creatively focused world requires.

A vision constrained by low or base ambition is no vision at all. Aim high, and we might just be surprised by what we can achieve. The life affirming, hopeful, exciting, and who knows – even transformational.

It won't be imaginable, certainly not do-able, if we don't make the space and time to let artists do their work, with us and for us. Because when all's said and done, they are us.

## Cathedral Builders

They climbed on sketchy ladders towards God,  
With winch and pulley hoisted hewn rock into heaven,  
Inhabited sky with hammers, defied gravity,  
Deified stone, took up God's house to meet Him,

And came down to their suppers and their small beer;  
Every night slept, with their smelly wives,  
Quarrelled and cuffed the children, lied,  
Spat, sang, were happy or unhappy,

And every day took to the ladders again;  
Impeded the rights of way of another summer's  
Swallows, grew greyer, shakier, became less inclined  
To fix a neighbour's roof of a fine evening,

Saw naves sprout arches, clerestories soar,  
Cursed the loud fancy glaziers for their luck,  
Somehow escaped the plague, got rheumatism,  
Decided it was time to give it up,

To leave the spire to others; stood in the crowd  
Well back from the vestments at the consecration,  
Envied the fat bishop his warm boots,  
Cocked up a squint eye and said, 'I bloody did that.'

John Ormond

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