

Perceptions of and requirements from the Arts Council of Wales

Qualitative research findings Final report

beaufortresearch





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1. Background, research objectives and research method

1.1 Background

The Arts Council of Wales is an independent charity and responsible for funding and developing the arts in Wales. In the context of the current economic climate, the Welsh Government now requires the Arts Council to reduce its running costs by 12 per cent between 2011 and 2014. This may involve changes to its current structure.

As part of this process, the Arts Council is conducting a full review of its future role and services. The review sets the following main task:

To implement new organisational and staffing arrangements for the Arts Council of Wales that meet current and anticipated needs in a creative, efficient and cost effective manner.

Consultation is seen as a vital component to the review: the Arts Council is seeking feedback from its own staff and from external clients and partners via the [Debate and Fact-finding](#) phase of the review.

Obtaining the views of those affected by any organisational change is essential. It demonstrates openness and a commitment to consider, within any clearly defined constraints, the interests of employees, partners and clients.

This research was concerned with gathering the views of external clients and partners. The Arts Council of Wales will combine the findings from discussions with staff to meet the requirements set out in the Terms of Reference for the review.

1.2 Research objectives

The overarching aim of the project was to clarify what external clients and partners require from a 'new' Arts Council of Wales. The focus was to be on exploring how the new organisation would serve the needs, and meet the expectations of, external clients and partners.

The invitation to tender set specific objectives to meet this aim:

- To identify current services or activities delivered by the Arts Council that were deemed to be high value/high priority
- To comment on current services or activities that were perceived to be of lesser priority
- To identify new services or activities that the Arts Council might provide in the future

- To advise on any new ways of working that the Arts Council should be investigating
- To identify any new partnerships that the Arts Council should be developing
- To consider the future context for the development of the arts in Wales and the changes that this might imply for the organisation

1.3 Research method

The research consisted of a qualitative approach to allow for a more in-depth examination of perceptions of the organisation, and what lay behind the opinions. Beaufort selected participants from extensive sample lists provided by the client, and according to a sample framework. The research sample was broadly divided between 'clients' and 'stakeholders' although it was recognised that there would be a degree of overlap between the two:

- **Clients** were defined as individuals and organisations who had applied to the Arts Council of Wales for funding (both successful and unsuccessful)
- **Stakeholders** covered a broad spectrum including organisations and individuals who interacted with the Arts Council of Wales in various ways

The final research design reflected the challenge presented by attempting to reach a wide range of participants. Three focus groups were conducted with clients, lasting up to two hours, with 27 people participating in total. The groups included a mix of participants within each group as follows:

- Organisations and individuals
- Revenue and project funded applicants
- Successful and unsuccessful applicants for funding
- A range of art forms

The groups were convened in Llandudno, Swansea and Cardiff.

Stakeholders took part either via an in-depth telephone interview (18 in total, lasting up to one hour) or by contributing to an online bulletin board forum (17 participants contributed), which was open for one week. The stakeholder sample covered:

- Welsh Government staff
- Local authority officers
- National advisers for the Arts Council of Wales
- Committee members of the Arts Council of Wales
- Regional Committee members of the Arts Council of Wales
- Communities First staff

- University staff
- Several other interested parties identified by the Arts Council of Wales including media, third sector and public body organisations

More detail on the sample composition is included in the appendix.

The research took place between 4 and 24 May 2011.

The report includes verbatim comments, made by participants, which are attributed according to whether they were clients or stakeholders. Where appropriate, these comments have been anonymised to ensure confidentiality for those taking part. The report highlights any differences across the sample as they arise, for example by region or type of participant.

2. Executive summary

Introduction

- Beaufort Research was commissioned by the Arts Council of Wales to explore perceptions of the organisation and what clients and stakeholders felt the Arts Council should prioritise.
- The research adopted a qualitative approach and consisted of three focus groups with clients; and 18 in-depth telephone interviews and one online bulletin board (17 participants contributing) with stakeholders.
- Clients were defined as individuals and organisations who had applied to the Arts Council of Wales for funding (both successful and unsuccessful). Stakeholders covered a broad spectrum including organisations and individuals who interacted with the Arts Council of Wales in various ways.

Overall perceptions of the Arts Council of Wales

- Perceptions of the organisation were often varied. Key top of mind positive associations with the Arts Council of Wales were its funding role (achieving a good budget settlement with the Welsh Government, enabling organisations and individuals to develop and achieve their goals); and a sense of change (new and decisive leadership, modernisation, more dynamism, collaboration and a more strategic and 'joined-up' outlook.)
- The main less positive associations concerned bureaucracy (the funding application process), the perceived remoteness of the organisation (including a lack of contact with, and visibility of, officers in the field, and a 'Cardiff-centric' approach to operations) and a sense of inconsistency (including perceived varying levels of expertise and capabilities of individual officers).

Current services, activities and their perceived value

- In terms of awareness of the Arts Council's activities, the key service that participants thought the organisation delivered was funding of the arts. Awareness of other specific services and support were limited, especially among clients.
- Some participants highlighted additional activities in relation to advocacy, raising the profile of the arts, research on participation in the arts among the general public in Wales and the Night Out Scheme.
- The range of services and support available, therefore, had to be prompted for most participants.
- Participants felt that an advocacy role was critical as a means of accessing funding and championing the importance of the arts in society in Wales. With a small number of exceptions, the Arts Council was felt to be

performing well in this respect in light of the outcome of the funding cuts agreement with the Welsh Government.

- Participants attached great importance to the Arts Council's efforts to promote small-scale performances in local communities with its Night Out Scheme, which was widely praised.
- Some participants believed that developing international opportunities was a key component to developing the arts in Wales and beyond and therefore a vital role for the Arts Council to play. Some, however, felt that Wales was not yet on the arts map globally and were uncertain what exactly the organisation's activities were in this area.
- Generating money for the arts economy was not an activity that participants immediately associated with the Arts Council of Wales, although they tended to be positive towards the concept. CollectorPlan (normally prompted as an example) was welcomed as an initiative.
- In the main, participants were uncertain how exactly the Arts Council provided advice about the arts and shared information on the arts in Wales. Some thought that it could be a useful service (for example with business support) although there was a degree of doubt over whether the Arts Council had the necessary art form expertise to provide advice. Those stakeholders who had accessed research reports from the Arts Council had found them to be a valuable resource.
- Partnership working was deemed an essential activity for the Arts Council of Wales and was largely viewed positively by those with experience of collaborating with the organisation. A number of issues emerged, however, with aspects of some of these relationships.
- Participants tended to find it very difficult to attempt to prioritise the services and support the Arts Council provides because most were deemed a priority and because there was a lack of familiarity with the activities themselves.
- Funding, advocacy, promoting small-scale performances in local communities, raising the profile of the arts and partnership / development working were the more likely to be highlighted as particular priorities.

Looking ahead for the Arts Council of Wales

- Few participants could think of specific new services / support the Arts Council should focus on. Isolated suggestions included business support and mentoring for clients.
- The two key challenges participants believed the Arts Council of Wales was facing related to the current economic and financial climate and the political challenge. Many felt that it was important that the organisation remained at arm's length from the Welsh Government as a means of continuing to pursue excellence in the arts.

- The key priorities which participants thought that the Arts Council *should* focus on were varied, reflecting the breadth of audiences, although funding remained at the forefront of their minds. There were calls to promote excellence and innovation and continued strong advocacy, among others.
- A further key priority suggested was to explore opportunities for new partnerships but also to strengthen existing ones. Interaction with the Welsh Government was regularly identified as an area to expand upon.
- Participatory community based activity and widening access were also important priorities that some believed the Arts Council should be focusing on as a way of developing the arts in Wales.
- In terms of perceptions of the organisational structure of the Arts Council, participants tended not to be in a position to comment in any great detail. There appeared to be little demand for significant change and a sense that the organisation in general was on the right track.
- Issues that were identified included the role of the regional offices, the role of the national advisers, and references to inconsistencies with staff expertise and capabilities.

Conclusions

- The research touched on a broad range of topics with a wide ranging audience. Even so, it is possible to identify themes that emerge across audiences.
- Among the mix of positive and negative views expressed by participants, there was a sense that the Arts Council of Wales was heading in the right direction with its strategy and under new leadership. The efforts to minimise funding cuts were also acknowledged. In addition, some very positive examples emerged of experiences of interacting with the organisation both as clients and stakeholders.
- The findings do indicate, however, that there are certain perceptions of the organisation that may need to be explored further and addressed. They centered on its remoteness, bureaucracy, South Wales bias, the role of national advisers, varying levels of staff expertise and experience in relation to the arts, and occasionally variations in staff capabilities in their roles.
- The limited awareness of the organisations' services and support suggests that more could be done to promote these activities.
- The research findings also pose the key question of how best to serve all regions of Wales, given that participants who referred to the topic believed the regional offices were important in principle.
- Two final conclusions can be drawn from the findings as key priorities: the importance for many who interact with the Arts Council of Wales of widening access to the arts and fostering participation at a community level; and the essential role that collaboration / partnership working is likely to

have in terms of helping to widen access and participation, reach local communities, realise more funding opportunities, and educate Government officials in different departments on the social and economic benefits of the arts on society in Wales.

Appendix: sample composition

The sample consisted of two main groups of participants: clients and stakeholders. Beaufort selected participants from extensive sample lists provided by the client, and according to a sample framework.

Research with clients: 26 participants took part in total: 11 in Cardiff, eight in Swansea and seven in Llandudno. For the latter focus group, only four participants out of the 10 recruited showed up for the meeting which meant that Beaufort conducted an additional three in-depth telephone interviews with participants to make the number up to seven – thus achieving the original target number for each focus group. The groups lasted up to two hours. It was evident that those attending enjoyed the opportunity to network with other participants.

Given below is detail on the client participants included in the research, covering art form / organisation represented and types of funding. It should be noted that on occasion participants had applied for different types of funding.

Clients breakdown

Art forms / organisation type represented across client focus groups	Arts development / arts consortium, community arts organisation, craft, drama, education, festival, film, literature, music, other charitable organisation, producing arts company, theatre, visual art, voluntary/amateur arts organisation
Individuals	10
Revenue funded organisations	5
Project funded organisations	5
Successful applications	13
Unsuccessful applications	13
Creative Wales Awards	6

Research with stakeholders / other interested parties: 35 stakeholders / other interested parties took part in total, either via an in-depth telephone interview (18 in total, lasting up to one hour) or by contributing to an online bulletin board forum (17 participants contributed), which was open for one week. A new set of questions was posted each day for three days. Participants were able to respond to the questions and read / comment on other participants' posts.

Given below is detail on the participants included as stakeholders / other interested parties across the 35 participants.

Stakeholders / other interested parties breakdown

Organisation / type of organisation	Number participated	Job title examples*
Welsh Government staff	5	Head of . . . Director of / Company Director . . . Arts Officer Chair Commissioner Communications Officer Communities First Co-ordinator Councillor Dean for . . . Development Officer Editor Freelance artist Inspector Professor Project Leader Project Manager Senior Adviser Senior Journalist
Local authority officers	4	
National advisers for the Arts Council of Wales	7	
Committee members of the Arts Council of Wales	2	
Regional Committee members of the Arts Council of Wales	3	
Communities First staff	2	
University staff	2	
Other arts related bodies	2	
Media	2	
Other public body organisations	6	

* In order to preserve participant anonymity it is not possible to give specific job titles. However, many participants from organisations were in senior, decision-making roles with titles such as 'Head of . . .' or 'Director of . . .'.