

Arts Council of Wales

“Strive to excel...”

A Quality Framework for Developing and Sustaining
the impact of the arts in Wales

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Cyngor Celfyddydau Cymru
Arts Council of Wales



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Inspire: Creativity and the Arts in Wales

Our vision is of a creative Wales where the arts are central to the life and well-being of the nation.

Our strategy is straightforward – it's summed up in just three words:

Make **Reach** **Sustain**

Making art, ensuring it connects and giving it a durable legacy are indivisible. And these are the themes that underpin our work.

When we talk about **Make**, we mean the act of artistic creation. We want to foster an environment for our artists and arts organisations in which they can create their best work. Because if we **Make** well, we inspire.

If we inspire, people get it. They want it and value it. So we must inspire the people of Wales to enjoy and take part in the best that our nation has to offer. This is what allows us our ability to **Reach**, and crucially to reach further than before.

If in doing this, something of worth is created in what is made or who is embraced, then we should ask how we protect and **Sustain** these things in ways that will endure.

And all the time, the goal is Wales – the creative Country.

Three priorities underpin our strategy. They are:

1. Promoting **Equalities** as the foundation of a clear commitment to reach more widely and deeply into all communities across Wales.
2. **Strengthening the Capability and Resilience** of the sector, enabling creative talent to thrive.
3. **Enabling the Arts Council to work more effectively**, collaborating more imaginatively with like-minded partners across Wales.

Introduction

Our ambitions for the arts are driven by strategy.

We work to create an environment in which artists' best work can be nurtured, promoted and sustained. These issues are explained in more detail in our Arts strategy – [Inspire: creativity and the arts](#).

In supporting the best, we want to encourage as many people as possible to enjoy and take part in creative activity. We believe that the arts have the potential to make an important contribution to our well-being and quality of life. So we want to see the people of Wales inspired by arts that are vibrant, compelling and engaging – arts that reach out and touch us; arts that ignite our imagination and creativity; arts that challenge us to search for a better understanding of ourselves and the world around us.

Make: Reach: Sustain.

Strive to Excel is not a strategy

In a world awash with policies and strategies, *Strive to Excel* is a different kind of document – part checklist, part organisational 'manual'. For simplicity, it's organised under the three headings **Make: Reach: Sustain**.

We're often asked how we differentiate between high performing and less successful organisations. So we created *Strive to Excel* as a quality framework – a document that sets out the attributes and characteristics that can commonly be seen in the most successful organisations.

As you read through the document, see if you recognise your own organisation. If you're able to tick off a significant number of the measures set out in the following pages, you'll be well on the way to having an effective and efficient organisation. But remember – it's not a 'one size fits all'. If you're a major national organisation with a multi-million pound turnover, we'd expect you to be able to demonstrate your achievements against most of the measures in this document. If you're a smaller, more local organisation, not all of what follows will be entirely relevant. It's up to you to take what's applicable to your organisation, and your particular circumstances.

Well-being and sustainability – the organising principle underpinning our work

We share the Welsh Government's intention that well-being and sustainability should be guiding principles that inform all aspects of our work, investment and service delivery.

The Welsh Government's ambitions are enshrined in legislation – the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. It represents a different way of thinking, planning and working. This means taking a broad view of what makes Wales a healthy and prosperous country by recognising the economic, social and environmental aspects that affect the

well-being of people and communities. If we get this right, we help achieve a better quality of life for our own and future generations.

Creating a more equal Wales

Working to support greater equalities across the arts is not new. The Arts Council of Wales published its first disability equalities strategy in 1995 and our first cultural diversity strategy in 2000. We've invested in training and support for arts organisations, encouraging them to implement successful equalities action plans. And we have provided practical help through the creation of our online [Equalities Guide and Toolkit](#). In more recent years we've launched initiatives such as Hynt (the all-Wales disability access card scheme) and Creative Steps (a developmental programme to support artists and organisations that have encountered barriers in their efforts to access funding).

Nevertheless, our research shows that the presence of people with protected characteristics in the population as a whole is far from being matched in the activities that we're funding. The simple fact is that the arts across Wales are currently reaching a tiny number of people from protected characteristic groups. The gap is especially striking in the shockingly low number of disabled people and those from BAME backgrounds employed or represented on boards of management. This disparity is a matter of considerable concern to Council.

Whether attending, taking part or working in the administration of the arts as employee or board member, we need to see a wider cross-section of the population having the opportunity to be involved in the publicly funded arts. Our goal is to go further than simply matching the overall national population statistics. The publicly funded arts should lead by example and be ambitious in its goals. This will be a key area in which we will assess the effectiveness of the organisations that we fund.

Making judgements, providing the evidence

Strive to Excel is a framework for quality and sustainable development that helps us – and the organisations that we fund – to think about and discuss, their work. If we say we want to support the best and the most sustainable activity, then we need to explain how we'll judge this.

Strive to Excel offers a single, consistent template for monitoring and assessment. It sets out the wide range of characteristics that we consider when looking at how well an organisation is succeeding. It's the yardstick that we apply to all of the organisations that we fund, large and small, international and more.

Making choices

There are a growing number of arts organisations that want to develop their work in Wales. This is enormously exciting. But it does mean that we face increasingly difficult decisions about how we allocate the funds at our disposal. That's fine – it's the challenge, and duty, that the public expects us to take on. However, the organisations that we fund

need to understand the choices that we make and the criteria that shape and inform the funding decisions that our Council takes.

We talk a lot about ‘Quality’.

Quality can be an elusive and contested concept. The arts change and develop, as does the consensus on how this work should be supported and sustained. *Strive to Excel* is not, then, a static or fixed document. We’ll review it, develop it and refine it over time, working closely with the organisations that we support.

Strive to Excel is intended to be used on an ongoing basis. However, from time to time – especially during one of our periods of **Investment Review** – this framework takes on a particular importance. We use Investment Reviews to decide the ‘portfolio’ of funded organisations that will be at the heart of the Arts Council’s future strategy to develop the arts in Wales.

Fulfilling the characteristics set out in this framework isn’t itself a guarantee of future funding. But an organisation is unlikely to present a persuasive case for funding if it can’t provide credible evidence that it’s measuring itself against the majority of characteristics that we’re looking for. If an organisation is achieving excellence in its artistic activity, reaching new and more diverse audiences, and demonstrating an intelligent commitment to sustainability, it’s more than likely that most aspects of its operation will be being delivered to a similarly high standard.

1. Make

The making of art is fundamental to what we do.

Each organisation that we fund delivers its work in its own, individual manner. However, at the heart of every organisation is the creative spark, that obsession that drives artistic mission and vision. There's no magic formula that can guarantee that a work of genius is created. Nevertheless, we're always keen to understand better how organisations formulate, shape and realise their artistic ambitions. We're also interested in how organisations engage with their public, and how this affects the creative choices that they make.

The successful creation of art depends on artistic leadership, a vision that transcends the ordinary or the commonplace, the confidence to take risks and reach for dimensions of expression that lie beyond the reach of the commonplace. But risk and ambition have to be managed – not haphazardly or irresponsibly, but knowingly and confidently, equipped with our best instincts, knowledge and expertise. In our opinion, a confident and effective arts organisation will be brave and take risks. But it will also embrace the honest and rigorous self-assessment of its work and make adjustments when this is needed.

A creatively strong organisation will have a clear vision of what it's trying to achieve, and will understand the context within which it's operating. It will actively elicit feedback and critical review and have the maturity to make changes (when this is necessary). It will use this intelligence to shape and inform future activity. It will be a leader amongst its peers, but flexible enough to accept the challenge of building challenging and innovative creative partnerships where they deliver benefit to the public and to the organisation itself.

Activity	Characteristics	Indicators of success
Artistic vision and leadership	<p>Organisation has a strong and coherent artistic vision which it communicates clearly internally and externally</p>	<p>Artistic ambitions are widely understood and respected</p> <p>Business Plan articulates a clear and compelling artistic vision – artistic policy is regularly and actively debated by the Board and ‘owned’ throughout the organisation</p> <p>The artistic vision is nurtured and developed through investment in the company’s creative professionals. There are imaginative strategies in place for key personnel to refresh and develop their knowledge and skills</p> <p>Clear sense of how organisation’s role and work helps contribute to the development of the arts in Wales (especially if it is a national company)</p>
	<p>There’s a clear relationship between policy and its enactment</p>	<p>Board is able to present an articulate explanation of how policy is translated into activity – able to explain how programming choices are made</p> <p>Organisation seeks real involvement with artists in its thinking and practice</p>
	<p>Open, self-aware and self-critical</p>	<p>Processes are in place to monitor, assess and review work. The organisation is open to, and keen to receive, different types of feedback</p>

Activity	Characteristics	Indicators of success
		<p>Honest and frank reports and assessments of artistic work are presented to the Board on a regular basis – the company has mechanisms to ‘reflect back’ what it has learned</p>
<p>Artistic programme</p>	<p>An exciting, compelling and high quality programme of activity</p>	<p>Positive responses from audiences, participants and customers – work often exceeds the expectations of audiences, participants or customers</p> <p>Positive reports from Arts Council officers, advisers and peers</p> <p>Critical acclaim from respected media and trade journals</p>
	<p>Innovative and imaginative approaches to creating and sustaining arts activity</p>	<p>Original processes for making or devising work</p> <p>Well-founded, imaginative and reasoned approaches to developing programmes, including a clear approach to taking and managing risks</p>
<p>Technical Attainment – craft and skill</p>	<p>Activity is executed to a high quality standard</p>	<p>The use of appropriately skilled artists, designers, makers and managers</p> <p>Evidence of work that has been thoughtfully conceived, prepared, produced or presented/exhibited</p>

Activity	Characteristics	Indicators of success
Reputation	Strong market for the organisation's work	Evidence that the work (or skills) of the company are respected, sought after and are in demand
	Peer acknowledgement of the quality of the work	Awards and prizes Local, national and international partnerships Invitations to participate in national and international arenas
Welsh language	Progressive and forward-looking commitment to promoting activity through the medium of the Welsh language	A clear statement of policy that explains the company's engagement with the Welsh language activity If applicable, a specific Welsh Language scheme Evidence that the Arts Council's expectations in respect of Welsh Language requirements are accepted and acted upon

2. Reach

From its inception, public funding for the arts has had twin goals: the pursuit of excellence, and the promotion of access to enable more people to enjoy and benefit from the arts. However, it's often the former which is traditionally favoured at the expense of the latter.

We want as many people as possible to experience and enjoy the arts. But there are two challenges.

The first is to grow the audience for the organisations and activities that we're already investing in. The second is to look beyond this to find new ways of engaging those who might have other interests. The former depends on ensuring that our Arts Portfolio Wales works to optimum capacity in more places, joining up and connecting to the other networks that exist in localities across Wales. The latter depends on finding new ways of reaching different audiences. This is a particular priority for the Arts Council.

Traditional definitions of culture, creativity and the arts can sometimes themselves be barriers to people enjoying and taking part in the arts. So if we want more people in Wales to be able to choose to make the arts a part of their lives, we might need to recognise different kinds of engagement with the arts if we're to reach a wider diversity of artists and communities.

It's sometimes argued that funders such as the Arts Council seem locked into a deficit model of funding based on the premise that not enough people are taking part in a prescribed range of arts and cultural activities (suggesting that alternative cultural activities are of little value). Perhaps more needs to be done to support the broad engagement of people in their individual and communities' creative lives on their own terms – what is increasingly being called “everyday creativity”. We're especially interested in organisations who are actively exploring these issues.

In our experience, the most effective arts organisations are those that are arts led but audience focused. They're also committed to reaching new, different and more diverse audiences, tackling the barriers that prevent people's access to the arts. Breaking down these barriers is one of the Arts Council's defining priorities. We aspire to a society that embraces equality and celebrates difference, wherever it's found.

Activity	Characteristics	Indicators of success
Awareness and understanding of audience, participants or customers	Develops policies designed to extend reach and engagement	<p>Organisation demonstrates clear understanding of who its 'community' is</p> <p>Can articulate the benefits of the organisation's activities and their contribution to community well-being</p>
	Audience data and knowledge is regularly used to inform overall planning and development	<p>Sets specific targets</p> <p>Has identified and analysed the barriers to engagement. Uses audience data and market analysis</p> <p>Commissions relevant research</p> <p>Conducts audience/participant/customer surveys and feedback</p> <p>Regular Board discussion of target audiences and how to reach them</p>
Equalities	Committed to ensuring that programme and activities accessible to the widest possible audience. Equality of opportunity and inclusion are actively promoted	<p>Commitment to equality reflected in the policies and practices of the organisation. Can point to specific examples of work that has successfully rolled back boundaries to inclusion</p> <p>Evidence that new and more diverse audiences are being reached</p>

Activity	Characteristics	Indicators of success
		Organisation has informed understanding of – and is acting on – current legislation and the requirement to acknowledge ‘protected characteristics’
Widening Activity	Has strategies that make clear the organisation’s engagement priorities	Programmes of work designed to engage with defined audience groups (for example children and young people, arts and older people)
Measuring Impact	Organisation can gauge the impact of its work over short, medium and longer term	Evidence that the organisation’s future planning is informed by such findings
	Has clear methodology	Can quantify the impact of its programmes of work
Marketing	Clear strategies are in place to market, promote and develop the organisation’s activities	Marketing issues discussed at the Board, with target markets/groups identified Clear marketing plans in place and resourced sufficiently (staff and budgets) with processes in place for monitoring and review
Public relations	Develops relationships with key partners and stakeholders	Stakeholders and partners actively engaged Well networked organisation

Activity	Characteristics	Indicators of success
Communications	The organisation demonstrates an innovative approach to developing its engagement with the public	Communications strategy in place Imaginative and innovative use of information communication technology

3. Sustain

If the arts in Wales are to thrive, they'll need strong, entrepreneurial leadership. This means building a sector that is ambitious, innovative and able to capitalise on its public investment. The best organisations do this. A resilient organisation is intimately embedded within the community that it serves and it adopts a business model that can withstand change, whether planned or unexpected. A resilient organisation is one that has the skill, capacity and resources to endure in the longer-term.

The public rightly demands that the individuals and organisations that they finance are efficient and cost effective. So we expect those who we work with to get the basics right and to ensure that they manage their affairs in a straightforward and business-like way. Public funding is not an entitlement – it has to be earned.

We look to the key organisations that we fund to play a leadership role in terms of innovation, entrepreneurship and audience development. We expect them to be well managed and governed, and we'll be rigorous in assessing whether this is the case. We also expect them to recognise the importance of value for money.

The Arts add value in a variety of social and economic contexts: promoting health and well-being, enlivening education and learning, offering arts based training for other sectors, being a cornerstone of social and physical regeneration. Such activity has clear social, cultural and economic benefits.

Organisations' artistic and economic growth is unlikely to be achieved in the absence of strong management and good governance. Critical to the success and resilience of any organisation is a strong, engaged and diligent Board (or managing body) that includes a range of representative expertise. It is the Board that sets the strategic direction of the company, support and challenge the executive staff in the delivery of the company's goals, and monitors financial and artistic performance.

The world we inhabit is changing, and changing fast. The challenges of environmental climate change, of intercultural dialogue, of developing new international markets take the arts organisations in new directions. They also reflect the issues and concerns embedded in the Welsh Government's Well-being legislation. Organisations who understand sustainability know that this needn't be a straight-jacket or a constraint. However, the environmentally mature organisation is likely to have weighed up the choices and to have developed its programme of work accordingly.

Activity	Characteristics	Indicators of success
Well-being of Future Generations	Implications of the Act are understood and feature in Board discussions	Well-being goals and “five ways of working” are reflected in the organisation’s activities
Governance and management	Active and engaged Board	Composition of the Board is commensurate to the task Board takes appropriate professional advice where necessary
	Clear and transparent processes for the recruitment and development of the Board	Clear terms of reference for the Board and any sub-committees Recruitment informed by regular analysis of skills needed
	Board have induction and regular updates	Established Board training and development programme
	Committed to improving the diversity of the Board	Has set specific targets designed to improve diversity
Planning	Board is actively involved in debating and developing the future direction of the organisation	A Business Plan that’s regularly monitored, reviewed and updated

Activity	Characteristics	Indicators of success
	Board has clear understanding of its risk 'appetite'	Organisation has a risk register that is regularly reviewed and updated
Management and staffing	Organisation has open and equitable recruitment practices	Organisations has clear plans to be a diverse employer Strong recruitment and retention of staff
	Organisation has progressive employment policies	Comprehensive Staff Handbook
	The organisation has job planning and appraisal processes	Staff have opportunities for training and development
Financial control	Board has a firm grasp of the organisation's financial performance	Organisation produces budgets, management accounts, cash flow forecasts. These are reviewed, and challenged where necessary, by the Board Board acts promptly to address unforeseen circumstances
Procurement	Organisation has a strong commitment to achieving value for money efficiencies	Achieves 'economy of scale' and efficiency savings
	The company contracts work within appropriate, agreed frameworks and to industry standards	Organisation recognised as an exemplar

Activity	Characteristics	Indicators of success
Income generation	Public investment helps ‘lever’ additional income from other sources	Lower than average ratio of public subsidy to earned income Organisation secures income from business sponsors, trusts and foundations
	Organisation has an entrepreneurial approach to generating income	Organisation capitalises on all appropriate opportunities to exploit commercial income
	Collaborates with others to extend the life of existing ‘products’ and services, or to create new ones	Co-commissioning, co-production, touring Develops shared services and joint activities
Exploitation of products and services	Understands how digital technology can offer new opportunities to create and distribute the arts	Can identify and define the organisation’s Intellectual Property Devises income through the use of digital technology and online platforms
	Makes use of available opportunities for tax relief (where this is appropriate and applicable)	Is generating income through Government tax relief schemes

Activity	Characteristics	Indicators of success
International activity	Has an International strategy (where this is applicable and appropriate)	<p>Organisation can explain why it engages in international activity</p> <p>International activity delivers cultural, financial and/or reputational benefits</p>
Sharing and collaboration	Promotes the use of shared services and joint working	Achieves 'bottom-line' savings through partnership and collaboration
Skills and training	Organisation has a Workforce Development strategy	Provides opportunities for apprenticeships, internships and traineeships
Contribution to the local economy	The organisation's activities have positive impact on local businesses	Evidence-based research demonstrating positive economic impact
Working through the arts to develop opportunities in other contexts	Organisation understands how its work can have relevance in a range of different economic, cultural and social settings	Evidence of high quality activity in areas such as arts and young people, arts and health, creative industries
Compliance	Organisation understands and fulfils its statutory reporting obligations, and is compliant with all relevant legislation and where appropriate all charity regulations	<p>Annual accounts and statutory returns are filed in a timely fashion</p> <p>Systems in place to provide assurance on key compliance issues</p>

Activity	Characteristics	Indicators of success
	Equal opportunities	Organisation has progressive policies
Relationships with stakeholders	Organisation meets regularly with funders and stakeholders	Provision of good quality information Attendance at Board meetings and events
Policy	Environmental sustainability integrated into organisation's policies and Business Plan	Signatory to Welsh Government Sustainable Development Charter Has secured Green Dragon accreditation or other recognised industry standards
	Measures, and reports on, its progress	Carbon footprint is reduced Reduced consumption has positive impact on bottom line
Operational management	Recycling is actively promoted	Carbon footprint is reduced
	Energy efficiency is monitored and reviewed	Reduced consumption has positive impact on bottom line
	Collaborative and shared working reduces environmental impact	Partnerships and relationships are in operation

Activity	Characteristics	Indicators of success
	Environmental implications of travel and subsistence are monitored and reviewed	Green and environmentally friendly work practices are evident

Further information

Compliance with all relevant legislation and charities regulations (where relevant) is expected. In particular, the obligations placed on directors by the various Companies Acts and Insolvency Acts, and on Trustees by the Trustees Act, must be adhered to.

Useful links:

Companies House

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/companies-house>

Charity Commission

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/charity-commission>

Governance and leadership

<https://culturalgovernancealliance.org/>

Well-being and Sustainability

<http://futuregenerations.wales/>