

Research paper

A new landscape for Wales

Short sector commentary on Arts Council Wales review of revenue-funded clients in December 2010. Included as an early effect of the 2008 "credit crunch" and the resulting "austerity" programme which resulted in significant changes to cultural policy and cuts to arts funding across the UK.



Given that this was the first comprehensive review of its portfolio by ACW, planned before the recession began to bite, it wasn't as bad as it could have been. However, it has left significant gaps. East Wales has lost two local authority galleries: Newport Museum and Art Gallery and Oriel Wrexham, leaving Oriel Davies in Newtown as the only funded gallery serving East Wales.

In shaping the new portfolio it seems many clients were chosen because they were the only ones in their field, rather than encouraging new organisations to develop and challenge the status quo. Because ACW's rationales were published it's easier to pick holes in the reasoning and to query why some organisations that met strategic objectives fell away. To use the business plan submissions as the sole yardstick for decision-making was wrong and it demonstrates the lack of a partnership approach to work with new and strategically important organisations, helping them through the process.

The visual arts community has been fairly muted – partially relieved that the cuts weren't as bad as expected. Let's remember that the visual arts in Wales have always

operated on a make-do-and-mend basis and that individual artists previously couldn't expect to achieve the grants now available, nor were there as many fit-for-purpose gallery spaces. Individual artists have been coming together to make their own clusters of activity across Wales and have continued to do this post-review. This clustering and sharing of resources and intelligence is the key to survival in the current economic climate.

Emma Geliot is a freelance journalist.

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The current economic climate is affecting people's ability to get about due to fuel costs, which affects our visitor figures and earned income. Schools are finding it increasingly prohibitive financially and time-wise to take part in our gallery-based education programme, and so our Education Officer has been doing more outreach work in schools with employed artists. While this is a great solution, as a venue-based organisation this compromises our visitor figures and we may inevitably have to think about alternative ways of using the building to keep attendance up.

ACW's Investment Review was well overdue and desperately needed. I personally thought the exercise was well done, if overly long. ACW was very upfront about the entire process, which I think is admirable. There have been significant losses, particularly in rural areas. Gwent lost a lot of revenue clients, and AM Veronica German has been complaining to the Minister for Culture about the losses in her part of Wales.

Amanda Farr is Director of Oriel Davies, Newtown.

oriel Davies.org

I've been critical of ACW in the past on a number of matters but the Investment Review set out a procedure which was clear, unambiguous and comprehensive. ACE has followed suit and made a similar set of decisions. There are some regrettable decisions but overall the cuts reflect ACW's determination to redress the available funding being spread too thinly and widely. Nevertheless I've been at great pains to point out to people that our settlements are still fairly lamentable compared to what equivalent organisations are receiving in England.

We can achieve resilience within the visual arts by doing great projects on limited resources, working cannily and collaboratively, taking opportunities that present

themselves, and by developing relationships with artists who exceed expectations.

Martin Barlow is Director of Mostyn, Llandudno.

mostyn.org

Because the sector in Wales has been so slow in taking up new technology b10c has spent all its energy on advocacy and professional development training, and not focusing on artistic or curatorial endeavours. Now b10c is planning to build up an artistic programme – although not being an RFO we won't necessarily have the infrastructure to operate Wales-wide and will be less focused on ourselves as a network.

We realise that the more we move towards production our audiences change and we need to look at how we develop that. We've recently looked at developing smartphone apps in a Welsh landscape, and are naturally looking at tourism as a source of support for that, in a way that we wouldn't have done with a commercial developer. I think organisations such as the Visit Wales tourist board have got a lot more interesting: their language is less at odds with contemporary culture now, so it's easier to communicate with them which is crucial, especially if you're working in new technology.

Emma Posey is Director of b10c.

bloc.org.uk

Whilst in England there seem to be few within the visual arts sector who have benefited from ACE's review of its portfolio, ACW has substantially strengthened its support for its visual arts RFOs. This is however concentrated strongly on the venues which recently also benefited from major capital investment – in particular Mostyn and Ruthin Craft Centre – while Ffotogallery, Chapter, Artes Mundi and g39 have received modest increases in cash terms.

This leaves the infrastructure for the visual arts in general, and in Cardiff in particular, still fragile and without a robust champion. Art in the public realm has been hit hard in Wales (as it was in England last month). Safle (the former Wales-based agency for public art) closed its doors last October, leaving Locws International in Swansea as the only organisation now active in the public realm, but with a local remit only. I am also concerned about too much introspection and we must ensure that the arts in and from Wales continue to develop and international profile.

One of ACW's objectives in the review must have been to put itself in a strong position in anticipation of the forthcoming Assembly elections, when the Heritage Portfolio may well change hands. In the coming months the focus is therefore likely to shift from the sector to ACW itself, its review of its own operations and what relationship it establishes with a new Assembly Government.

Wiard Sterk, Principal of Urban Condition

urbancondition.co.uk

The Elbow Room cooperative was formed to continue the valuable work we did in Safle. By being directly in control of the decision-making, we could develop and maintain a creative approach to our work and feel more directly engaged with the wider field of visual arts practice.

Overall, despite the challenges, we feel positive about our achievements so far. Inevitably, it has been hard work setting up while running projects and trying to survive financially. Capacity is a big issue. The reality is that like many people working in the arts, we have several jobs and therefore little time.

To be sustainable and resilient a key factor is developing and nurturing partnerships. We have already benefited from the collaboration and support of several arts organisations in Cardiff, which has increased our capacity to deliver and helped to connect us to the wider network of visual arts activity. We hope to continue developing this further afield in Wales.

Elbow Room (Cincia Mutigli, Nia Metcalfe, Walt Warrilow)

Commissioning art in the public realm is an excellent example of a system of mixed public and private funding, brought about by public art policy and adopted by a number of authorities and national governments in the UK. It is through collective partnerships we will find suitable funding mechanisms for supporting, championing and sustaining artists' practice.

A chief concern is that many public sector projects that I am currently working on are funded from budgets created prior to the economic downturn. The funding crisis may be deeper for the arts in forthcoming years.

Wales needs a review of support and services that have been reduced as a result of the cuts and which of the remaining revenue clients can pick up the work – not just in the delivery of services, but in the lobbying and advocacy of the visual arts to central and local government. The most potent argument is whether the visual arts in Wales will remain an important economic driver should public investment be reduced.

I would urge local government, funding bodies and the national arts councils to ensure that the current economic climate does not distract from more important issues of supporting artists and the creation of works of excellence. We should shift the balance to collective activism to ensure artists can continue their practice free from political box-ticking, otherwise we are in danger of creating a formulaic, more conservative and less creative art scene.

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For more on arts funding see the [Arts Funding tag](#).

a-n.co.uk April 2011

Image: Simon Whitehead, *Loophole*. Photo: Ben Stammers. Newtown (commissioned by Oriol Davies Gallery), 2010.

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