

How the arts can help address health inequalities

Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown into sharp focus the issue of health inequalities in Wales and across the UK, and has exposed the consequences of a long-standing failure to tackle this deep-rooted and multi-faceted problem.

Health inequalities, however defined, means avoidable deficits in health and wellbeing outcomes between population groups e.g. socio-economic status and deprivation; protected characteristics such as age, sex, race, sexual orientation, disability; or geography in relation to urban or rural areas etc. Socio-economic health inequalities, for example, refer to the differences in health and wellbeing outcomes experienced by economically deprived populations



compared to more affluent populations. On the other hand, the contention that engagement with the arts can significantly improve physical and mental wellbeing is well-established, particularly among people who live with underlying health conditions and are at risk of feeling lonely or socially isolated.

It is important therefore that those involved in delivering arts projects recognise that the groups most likely to experience unequal health outcomes are the same groups that have been historically under-represented in the arts.

There are a number of ways in which engagement with the arts can help to reduce health inequalities. For example, engaging in creative activity with members of the local community supports improved social integration, which, as evidenced in the first Marmot Review report “*Fair Society, Healthy Lives*”, is one of the key underpinning factors that leads to good population health, particularly among less affluent groups.

While there are some examples in Wales of arts and health projects that aim specifically to increase engagement with the arts among marginalised and under-represented groups, the arts and health community still has some way to go to achieving a level playing field.



Given we know how powerful an intervention engagement with the arts can be, alongside what we know about lower levels of engagement with the arts among minority groups, this briefing is intended to act as a springboard for a new conversation that considers why engagement with the arts is lowest among those who may benefit most from it, and what steps we can take to bridge the gap in Wales.

Introduction and context

The notion that a person's health and wellbeing is determined by a wide range of factors, of which contact with the NHS is only one, is well-established. Generally speaking, people in Wales are healthier than ever before and are living longer – indeed, the percentage of the Welsh population aged 80 and over is expected to increase by 44% by the year 2030.

However, while it is testament to the achievements of the NHS that an increasing number of people are living longer and staying in good health for a larger proportion of their lives, marked health inequalities persist in Wales. These inequalities are estimated to cost between £3 and £4 billion per year through higher welfare payments, productivity losses, lost taxes and additional illness.

The factors that determine these inequalities are known collectively as the social determinants of health. In other words, they are the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age. Some examples include:

- The availability of resources to meet daily needs (e.g. safe housing)
- Access to health services
- Access to educational, economic and employment opportunities
- The availability of community-based resources to support recreational and leisure activities
- Access to public transport services
- The level of exposure in a community to crime, unrest and social disorder.

It is important to point out that while there are clear health inequalities on the international level, inequalities also manifest themselves on localised and hyper-localised levels. For example, the difference in life expectancy between a person living in the most and least deprived areas of Cardiff is 10 years. This is despite the fact that their place of residency may be as little as a few miles away.

In Wales, the legislative landscape means we have a clear opportunity to address health inequalities. The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 places a legal obligation on public bodies in Wales, including NHS organisations and the Arts Council of Wales, to think about the long-term impact of the decisions they make. The Act also urges public bodies to work better and more collaboratively with citizens and communities and provides a framework for public bodies to work together to take a preventative, joined-up approach to the planning and delivery of services.

In addition, the socio-economic duty in Wales, which will enter force on 31st March 2021, places a legal obligation on relevant public bodies in Wales to reduce inequalities that result from socio-economic disadvantage when making strategic decisions. Acting in accordance with the duty will support the drive for enabling people across Wales to fulfil their potential regardless of their socio-economic background, sex, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, geography or disability.

Opportunities to engage with the arts therefore, which should be provided to everyone in Wales, support this vision because they contribute to all aspects of public life. The arts enrich our lives, improve societal cohesion and increase our sense of wellbeing.

Working towards growing arts & health activities for the benefit of all

It is testament to the work that arts and health practitioners in Wales have done, as well as national bodies such as the Arts Council of Wales, that Wales has established itself among world leaders for delivering arts and health initiatives and improving outcomes through creative activity.

However, there is a need to do more in relation to equalities - to reach wider and involve more people from diverse backgrounds in arts & health activities, ensuring that the health and wellbeing benefits of engaging in the arts are experienced by those who stand to benefit most from them.

To make progress, we need to arrive at an agreed shared understanding about:

- What constitutes an arts & health project that helps address health inequalities?
- What distinguishes such projects from mainstream arts projects that involve or are led by deaf/disabled people; people from diverse backgrounds?
- How do we benchmark our starting point? Have we identified a gap in practice here?
- Who do we need to be partnering/collaborating with to take forward this work?
- What realistic targets can we collectively commit to?
- What will success look like?

Case studies

Below are some examples of arts and health projects in Wales that have sought to improve engagement with the arts specifically among groups that have been under-represented in arts and health initiatives.

The Golden Years Project

During lockdown, the Golden Years project engaged 15 older women from ethnic minority backgrounds in Cardiff in creative activities such as jewellery-making and painting. The team delivered the arts and crafts materials to the participants' homes and held weekly Zoom sessions where new activities were taught. A WhatsApp group was set up for communication between sessions where participants discussed work in progress and showcased their jewellery and other crafts.

As English was most women's second language, interpreters were present in the Zoom sessions as well as in the WhatsApp group and they translated English instructions into Arabic, Gujarati, Urdu and Bengali.

In these multi-lingual sessions, the women learned new skills, expressed their cultural traditions and engaged their grandchildren in new activities which minimised the anxieties that lockdown brought upon their lives. This project will resume in the new year and Y Lab is working with Women Connect First to develop culturally appropriate arts and health research.

For more information, contact Amal at amal@womenconnectfirst.org.uk or see [here](#).

Conversations / Future Selves

When 'normal' doesn't work for so many, how can we creatively imagine what the future looks like together?

Conversations / Future Selves is a project initiated by Theatre Maker & Access Consultant [Jonny Cotsen](#); Curator & Producer [Louise Hobson](#); and Arts Development Manager Sarah Goodey ([Gwent Arts in Health](#) / Aneurin Bevan University Health Board) as part of the Y Lab / Arts Council Wales 'HARP' ([Health, Arts, Research, People](#)) innovation programme [Sprint](#). Sprint looks at how the arts can support people living through lockdown and how access to arts interventions can be improved.

The Conversations / Future Selves website intends to uplift the voices of D/deaf, neurodivergent and disabled practitioners to create and hold a space for their voices to be heard. Organisers are speaking specifically to those working in the arts and/or health sectors in Wales. It is hoped that the works produced will prompt further potentialities in both the arts and health sphere in Wales, but also the arts more generally.

The artworks produced can be viewed via the following links:

- [Aisling Gallagher & Calum Perrin's](#) audio piece explores how their sonic landscapes have changed since the Coronavirus pandemic, and imagines how they could change in the future.
- [Sophia McLean's](#) monologue examines a future, where 'normal' could be normal for everyone.
- [Joseph Powell-Main:](#) In his dance piece 'Ddraig', Joe is interested in how both Carmen and the red dragon, a national symbol for Wales, embody a strength and power which is impossible to ignore.
- [Sophie Stone's](#) film 'Hiraeth' explores a yearning for home and asks us how we create a better version of ourselves when we emerge out the other side into a post-pandemic world?
- [Matthew Taylor's](#) poetry reflects on what it will be like and how it will feel for a deaf person in a post-lockdown world. His poem '*The New Normal*' is layered onto beats, the beats creating a soundscape that reverberates feelings of fear and anxiety.
- [Tanya Raabe-Webber's](#) video work follows the process of painting a self-portrait. Filmed in a silent time lapse, Tanya reflects on an intense emotional sense of self.



Dementia and Diversity, Y Lab

Hosted by the 'Y Lab' programme (a collaboration between Cardiff University and the innovation foundation Nesta), Diverse Cymru and Alzheimer's Society Cymru have come together to deliver the Dementia and Diversity Project. The project aims to understand the different ways in which dementia is experienced by diverse communities in Wales in relation to ethnicity, sexuality and disability. The project is funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales' Enhancing Civic Mission and Community Engagement Fund.

Stigma is powerfully experienced by people living with dementia and particularly by those from minority communities because it can create additional barriers to accessing necessary social and structural supports, which can intensify experiences of exclusion. The aim of the Dementia and Diversity project is to plug this gap by engaging and understanding the needs of those living with dementia among diverse communities and their carers in Wales.

This project has four work streams:

- Engage people who live with dementia, their carers and healthcare professionals in face-to-face meetings and online discussions
- Disseminate and communicate findings through creative means back to the engaged communities and relevant healthcare providers
- Develop a dementia cultural competence toolkit to support the inclusion of diverse communities of people with dementia and carers in research
- Use the findings to generate new research project ideas with participating organisations as co-applicants.



The project has collaborated with National Theatre Wales and The Reality Theatre in Newport to develop performances that communicate research findings. This has been delivered through the medium of short films that will soon be made available online. The first performance, which will focus on dementia, hearing loss and the role of family within the context of health inequalities, is scheduled to be premiered during the Festival of Social Sciences this November.

For further information, please contact Dr Sofia Vougioukalou, Y Lab Research Fellow for Arts and Health, at vougioukalous@cardiff.ac.uk.

New Dance – Delivering dance sessions at a HMP Berwyn to support recovery and rehabilitation

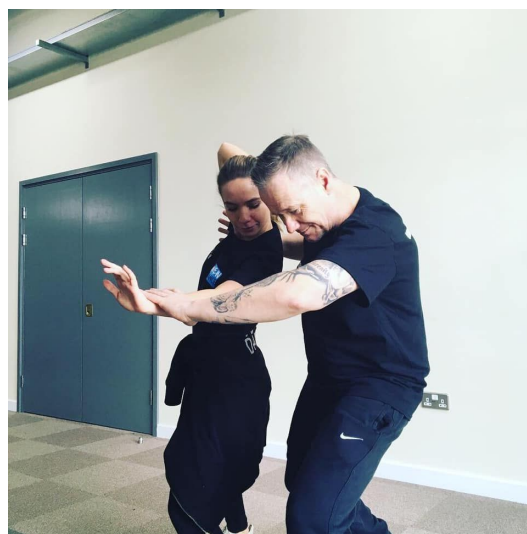
In February 2018, New Dance began a partnership project with HMP Berwyn - a men's prison in Wrexham. The project was set up to give the residents the opportunity to engage with dance sessions and perform a piece created by the participating group to their peers and staff at the prison. The purpose of the project is to promote physical and mental wellbeing among the residents, for them to increase skills such as commitment, confidence, teamwork and resilience, and to provide a new experience for many of them who may not have danced before.

The initial partnership began with two New Dance practitioners running the pilot scheme in the prison, the success of which led to more funding being secured to continue the work. At this point, New Dance Artistic Director Angela Fessi was keen to add an additional element to the project in the form of a transitional pathway from prison to the community, which would ensure that those men who wished to continue with dance upon their release would have the opportunity to do so.

Angela approached Fallen Angels Dance Theatre (FADT) - a dance company that supports those in recovery from addiction – to discuss working collaboratively on the project. FADT were delighted by the prospect.

Each project and session has to be carefully planned in advance, to ensure that the equipment required to play the music needed for the session will be available, as the practitioners cannot bring their own due to the prison's security procedures. The prison's population is constantly changing, due to current residents moving to other prisons or being released, and new men arriving. This is reflected in the attendances at the dance sessions; however, the practitioners have a motto: "Always forwards, never backwards." No matter which participants are present at each workshop, they keep the sessions progressing so that the whole group is always working towards the end goal of a finished dance piece of which the participants can be proud.

Feedback given on the completed projects shows that these goals are achieved for many of the participants – we have received comments such as "...it really brought us all together", "I felt a bit out of my comfort [zone] but soon got into it", and "makes me smile". Uptake on the current project (which has unfortunately had to be suspended due to Coronavirus) has been very high, due to the great example set by the previous cohort.



NEW DANCE

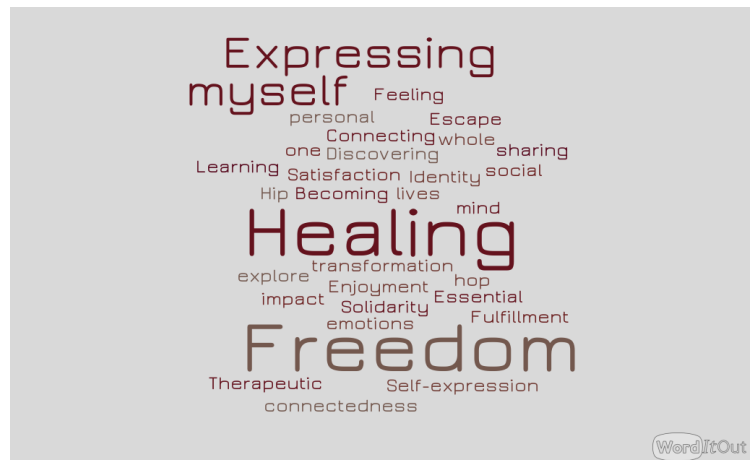
The Public Involvement and Patient Experience in Research (PIPER) group

The Public Involvement and Patient Experience in Research (PIPER) group consists of 20 members of the public who engage in arts and health activities and use their lived experiences to provide a strong service-user voice in Y Lab's innovation and research programme on arts and health.

The group was formed in June 2020 and operates remotely. Participants engage via email, over the phone and through Zoom. The group's participants span five decades (25-75), nine ethnic backgrounds and 12 health conditions and lived experiences (including severe depression, prostate cancer, lung disease, HIV and Asperger's Syndrome among others). Together, the group engages with nine different art forms - poetry, sculpture, singing, drawing, drama, hip hop, breakdancing, African drumming, classical music and rock music.

Group members have been involved in advising on the group's Terms of Reference, the structure of online surveys that were aimed at arts and health professionals and participants, and have also shared their experiences of accessing arts and health activities remotely during lockdown.

For further information, please contact Dr Sofia Vougioukalou,
vougioukalous@cardiff.ac.uk



How can the Welsh NHS Confederation help you?

Please get in touch if you want further details on any of the issues raised in this briefing. Please contact **Nesta Lloyd-Jones, Assistant Director**, on Nesta.Lloyd-Jones@welshconfed.org

The Welsh NHS Confederation is the only national membership body which represents all the organisations that make up the NHS in Wales: the seven Local Health Boards, the three NHS Trusts and Health Education and Improvement Wales (HEIW). We are also part of the NHS Confederation and host NHS Wales Employers

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