
Annual Review Report 2009/10

Aberystwyth Arts Centre

Arts Council of Wales
July 2009

About the Annual Review Meeting

Venue:	Arts Council of Wales, Carmarthen Office
Date of meeting:	23 June 2009
Present (Aberystwyth Arts Centre):	Alan Hewson (Arts Centre Director)
Present (Arts Council):	Amanda Loosemore (Regional Director) Sian Griffiths (Lead Officer) Lowri Clement (Senior Client Liason Officer)
Date of draft report:	16 July 2009
Date of final report:	4 August 2009

1. Programme of activity

Based on the campus of Aberystwyth University, Aberystwyth Arts Centre continues to be one of Wales' busiest and most vibrant cultural hubs. Last year, there were over 400,000 attenders for the Arts Centre's vast and eclectic artistic programme. This programme included theatre performance, visual arts and new media, applied arts, film and cinema, festivals, music, literature, education/outreach programmes and community arts programmes.

With such a diverse and wide-ranging programme it is almost invidious to pick out highlights. However, by mentioning some of the particular achievements, it becomes easier to offer an indicative sense of the Arts Centre's programme policy.

The visual arts and new media programme saw over 50 artists showing work in 2008/09). These included South African William Kentridge, *Seven Fragments for George Melies*, *Day for Night* and *Journey to the Moon*, an extraordinary installation of nine projected works playing alongside each other with one soundtrack. Jordan Baseman, with *Inside Man*, showed a programme of four projected works with one specifically commissioned by the Arts Centre projected at the entrance to the exhibition.

There were two unique, but diverse, painting exhibitions. The *Jerwood Contemporary Painters* saw twenty young artists selected by Stephen Farthing. The *BP Portrait Award*, ("fifty five works filled with personal histories etched into the human face"), brought to Aberystwyth one of the most prestigious painting competitions in the world.

The vast exhibition programme also featured artists such as Guy Tillim, Emma Summers, Bobby Baker, Anya Gallaccio, Anthony Gormley, Vong Phaophonit, Damien Hurst, Jana Sterbank, Sandy Brown, Ian Berry, Rhodri Jones, Paul Peter Piech, Richard Cox and James Morris, amongst others.

Touring exhibitions remain a key element in the Centre's artistic programme in promoting the work of the artists and the Arts Centre to a much wider audience. Four major exhibitions by Rhodri Jones, Pete Davis, David Hurn and James Morris toured to Wales, the U.K and Europe.

Arts Council *Beacon* funding was used to research new developments and opportunities that would otherwise not have been possible. An example of this would be Stan's Cafe (the renowned performance and arts installation group) with *Of all the People in the World*, which will take place this year.

Another important development was the *Artists' Residency Programme* funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. These are based within *The Creative Units*, a new £1.25million project (by top UK designer Thomas Heatherwick) to provide innovative and modern workspaces. Over eighty applications were received for eight residencies, offering a period of 'time out' to concentrate on the development of their work in a creative atmosphere. Residencies started in September 2008 on a three month basis with residents living locally and interacting with Arts Centre staff on a mentoring basis. So far, the residents have made good use of their time, made new work and shown this work to a wider public audience. The *Artists' Residency Programme* will continue for 3 years within its current form with further funding being sought thereafter.

In addition to the UK residencies, Jean Yves Vigneau (a multi-disciplinary artist from Canada), had a three month residency supported by Wales Arts International. Nearly all the applications were from visual and new media artists, although the scheme included applied arts, but the Arts Centre has redressed this balance with a new applied arts residency starting in June 2009, funded by the ACW Beacons Award.

Other successful continuations included the *International Ceramics Festival*, with top ceramicists from China, Japan, Norway, U.S.A. and Wales demonstrating to almost 1,000 people from around the world. With kiln firings, workshops, films, lectures and discussions, this is the largest ceramics festival in the U.K.

Exhibitions of ceramics and jewellery continued in the Craft and Design Shop, raising the profile of new emerging makers alongside those who are more well-established.

The vast *Arts Education Programme* covers all the arts forms and just a sample from different areas of work included the twelve productions during the year with highlights being *Cider with Rosie*, *Peter Pan*, *Under Milkwood*, *Sweeny Todd* and *The Burston Drum* all by Arts Centre companies including Stage School, Youth Theatre and Community Theatre Groups. Dance education work included the Dance Centre regular classes with over six hundred members from 5 to 18, adult classes offering a range of work from Chinese dance, Salsa, Belly dance and Contact improvisation as well as workshops from seven visiting companies ranging from hip hop to ballet to tango.

Performing Arts Easter and Summer schools bring a wide range of young people and adults from throughout mid Wales for the week long intensive courses with the very young age ranges being catered for with the twice weekly innovative Clwb 123, pre school creative sessions for mothers, babies and toddlers.

New media work continues to grow with the development of the Digilab workshop and regular open sessions as well as animation and film making courses and workshops and major Digitalstorytelling projects such as *"Here and There"* bringing secondary school pupils with English as second language together with professional writers and film makers to tell their own story of life in two cultures.

2008/9 saw a successful partnership develop with the Film Agency for Wales, and various pilot projects (such as the Saturday Art Club, Live Guides, Artists Talks and gallery education workshops) were all made possible through Arts Council *Beacon* funding

The Arts Centre *Arts Education Programme* for 2009/10 is planning to feature various projects made possible through a 'Reach the Heights' application and *Beacon* funding. More activity is also planned around Digital Storytelling projects and Digilab new media programmes developing film education and production using existing visual arts models.

The performing arts programme of music, theatre, literature and dance continues to develop. The investment of Arts Council *Beacon* and *Arts Outside Cardiff* funding has helped focus on a more intensive commitment to audience development and quality programming.

The development priorities for 2008/09 (and ongoing priorities into the future) include: week long runs of well-researched, substantial and important pieces of theatre from acclaimed companies we already have a growing relationships with such as Ed Hall's award winning company *Propeller*.

Another important development has been the increase in young audiences through young ambassador schemes and special ticket deals for schools. There has also been the development of a family friendly programme, with a wide range of productions including *Tall Stories*, from Italian company *Lyngo* and a return by Canadian company Cas Public, who recently won a standing ovation at the Arts Centre for their performance.

Innovation and risk-taking are key principles underpinning the Arts Centre's approach to programme. An example of this has been a new performance 'strand' pushing the boundaries of what is traditionally thought of as 'theatre'. Experimental performance collectives across a range of artforms have been presented as part of the *Studio Open Platform Programme*. *Open Platform* is now in its 9th year and for 2008/9 presented the work of 27 young companies.

Aberystwyth Arts Centre continued to expand its middle scale, in house productions and followed its 2007 tour of *Great Expectations* with *Kindertransport*, in 2008, working with writer Diane Samuels and director Dan Danson. This production toured to Brecon, Cardiff, Swansea, Mold, Caernarfon and Newtown.

Productions by Mappa Mundi and Theatr Mwldan, Volcano, Clwyd Theatre Company, Theatr Na Nog and Arad Goch continue to feature in the Arts Centre programme as well as work with young theatre companies such as *Bold Productions*. And the ongoing relationship with Theatre Genedlaethol Cymru, Sherman Cymru and Theatr Bara Caws ensures the availability of quality Welsh language production.

The Arts Centre's professional development pilot project for dance practitioners *Deep Blue*, in collaboration with Diversions, proved to be a particular highlight. *Deep Blue* opened at the Arts Centre and then toured to W.M.C. Another highlight was the new 'Dance Buddy' scheme with Eddy Ladd and Sean Tuon John in association with Creu Cymru. Other highlights of the dance programme included, Momentum, Protein Dance and New English Ballet. Dance, opera and theatre audiences also had the experience of benefiting from the Arts Centre's new digital screening capability to enjoy live performances from around the world. These screenings included the Royal Ballet's *Nutcracker*, *New York Metropolitan Opera's Cinderella* and the National Theatre's *Phedre* with Helen Mirren.

The Arts Centre's professional summer musical for 2008, *My Fair Lady*, supported by *Arts Outside Cardiff* funding again brought together the creative team led director Michael Bogdanov which had such success with *West Side Story* in 2007.

Arts Outside Cardiff and *Beacon* funding supported the Arts Centre's next phase of groundbreaking new writing strand, '*Travelling Light*' which is now working with a new team of emerging writers led by Kaite O'Reilly. Literature and storytelling continue to build dedicated audiences.

Future plans include a new commission following on from the success of 2007 new adaptation of *Great Expectations*, international co-productions and a new co-production with Brith Gof and Taliesin Arts Centre. A new *Beacon* funded performing arts residency programme is also planned.

2. Artistic leadership

Under the leadership of the Arts Centre's Director, artistic plans are developed, produced and implemented by the Arts Centre's Artistic Team. A skilled and experienced team of arts professionals are fully involved in the debate around programme policy, and plans are discussed with the University's Senior Management team prior to final approval.

The Arts Centre has an established and impressive track-record for the quality, drive and ambition of its programming. This is evident not only in the comprehensive range of programming across artforms, but also by the respect the Arts Centre's Artistic Team enjoys amongst its peers.

As the programme demonstrates, this is an organisation that does not rest on its laurels, but instead is constantly thinking about how it can develop, renew and refresh its programme of activity. There is an entrepreneurial spirit within the staff team that is quick to recognise an opportunity, and undaunted by a challenge. This 'can do' attitude manifests itself in an organisation that is self-evidently confident, ambitious and forward-looking.

The Arts Centre successfully received a *Beacon* funding in 2008 in recognition of its ambition to be recognised as a national centre for arts development. In our view, the Arts Centre presents a persuasive case to be accorded such an accolade. The challenge, as the current funding environment remains constrained, will be to maintain this reputation.

3. Public engagement

The Arts Centre's wide-ranging programme of activity is accessible to all in its widest sense. Public engagement and equal opportunities are seen as integral, as the organisation believes that the arts should be fully accessible to all. Its extensive artistic programme is developed with all areas of the rural community in mind, with the *Community Arts and Education Programme* especially seen as one of the largest with regards to participation and artistic scale.

As one might expect from an arts organisation on a university campus, the Arts Centre has a particularly strong engagement with young people of all ages. However, there are also well developed links with local communities. Developing strong working links and relationships with local groups, societies and organisations continues to be a priority for the Arts Centre, as is maintaining a consistent level of access for all users and the continuation of a bilingual service to their customers.

The Arts Centre continues to work in *Communities First* areas, where a number of courses and workshops have been held. A good example was the photography project based on the theme of healthy eating with Llwyn yr Eos Primary School in Penparcau, which linked to the Arts Centre Food Festival.

Future plans include a *Reach for the Heights* application which will target young people who live in *Communities First* areas. A Digital Storytelling application will focus on elderly, lesbian and gay groups, and there will be two exhibitions from Autograph ABP, an international photographic arts agency addressing cultural identity and human rights. These will be accompanied by related talks, events and workshops.

Other initiatives include *Clwb Celf Cymraeg*, a Welsh language art class for young people, and work with *The Circuit* to develop projects through the Foundation Phase for schools.

4. Governance, management and finance

The Arts Centre does not have a Board of management as it is part of Aberystwyth University. The Arts Centre Director has responsibility on a day to day basis to the Registrar and the Director of Finance. Generally the University is very supportive and meet as a Senior Management Team Group to discuss and review in detail the work of the Arts Centre on a quarterly basis.

The business plan is developed with the Arts Centre's staff who are tasked with the delivery of the plan. The latest Business plan covers the period 2009-2014 and is monitored, evaluated and updated on an annual basis by the Arts Centre staff and trading Accountant and is overseen by the Vice Chancellor's Group and Senior Management Team.

As the Arts Centre operates without an external Board, the introduction of an advisory Development Board to spearhead fundraising and act as an advocate for the Arts Centre and its staff would be a welcome development. This is currently being discussed with the University's Vice Chancellor, and it is hoped that an Arts Centre Development Board will put in place once the University re-organises the Development Department and the post of Director is in place. Given this, it will be essential that the Arts Council is kept closely informed of developments.

Although the year saw some major fundraising achievements including over £80,000 from the Esme Fairbairne Foundation for the Artists in Residence scheme and £125,000 from Axis 3 European funding, the Arts Centre saw a

overall deficit in 2008/09, mainly due to the effects of the economic downturn particularly on the retail areas of the Centre's operation as well as the effects of University salary restructuring. In addition standstill funding from Aberystwyth University, Ceredigion County Council and the Arts Council of Wales – combined with the contractually agreed staff salary increments and rising costs – are a contributory factor to the current deficit of £117,000 on a turnover of £4,000,000.

The Arts Centre has been tasked by the University to reduce its current deficit by year 3 and generate surpluses in years 4 and 5. The Arts Centre has an excellent track record with regards to fundraising from the public and private sectors, trusts and foundations as well as earned income. Continuing success will become even more important when set against the backdrop of continuing economic uncertainty. This is an area that the new advisory development Board might usefully consider.

Another future development which will have a major financial impact on the Arts Centre will be the Building and Equipment programme 2009-2014. Given the age of the original buildings now approaching forty years old, significant elements of the infrastructure need replacing or upgrading. The major re-development in 2000 was primarily focused on new facilities and equipment, and did not address long-term maintenance needs, such as the urgent rewiring of the theatre. This Building and Equipment programme will be partly funded by the University by the Arts Centre's own income generation as well as through a significant drive to raise external funding.

The new Creative Units development funded by ACW Lottery, Assembly and Aberystwyth University is the largest capital project undertaken by the Arts Centre since the 2000 redevelopment. It has already seen all 16 studio spaces let with a creative mix of artists, arts businesses and arts development agencies. This model is seen very much as a self sustaining one with the more commercial operations subsidising the more artistic elements. The planned interaction between the resident artists and companies themselves, the Arts Centre and creative community in Mid Wales is already bearing fruit and is seen a major driver of the next phase of the Arts Centre's development.

5. Marketing

2008/09 was a particularly challenging year for the Arts Centre for two reasons within the Marketing department.

Firstly, the organisation was without a marketing officer for probably the busiest five months of the year. However, temporary cover through the Go Wales Graduate Placement (with support from staff and colleagues in other departments) helped maintain the Arts Centre's core marketing activity and service. The box office also saw staff turnover due to the retirement of one of its longest serving staff members. Operating with a limited quota of staff placed additional pressure on the team. Yet, overstretched though they were, current staff members managed to juggle box office duties when appropriate cover was required. This was a challenge for all involved, but it was successfully navigated by a committed team.

Secondly, maintaining attendance figures in the face of a recession was a worry. In fact, attendances generally remained strong, despite fears of the economic downturn.

Key productions, visits from internationally renowned companies and the Centre's own in-house productions and tours will certainly have helped keep attendances steady. And the cinema and comedy programmes actually saw increased attendance. A contributing factor could be the ever popular *WOW Film Festival* and also the *Abertoir Film Festival*.

Brochure design and size was also changed after two seasons as customer and staff feedback was less than positive.

Future plans for 2009/10 include the updating of box office systems. Website services will also be improved, and the planned refurbishment of foyer spaces will include information points for customers.

6. Partnerships and relationships

The Arts Centre's relationship with Ceredigion County Council continues to be cordial. Funding is less than in the past, but at a stable level thanks to their service level agreement with the County. Since the appointment of Dr Rhodri Llwyd Morgan to the post of Assistant Director of Cultural Services, the Arts Council have also convened two meetings with the three Ceredigion arts centres which have proved to be beneficial and positive to all concerned.

The Arts Centre enjoys a good working relationship with Welsh Assembly Government departments, such as Economy and Transport (who were a significant partner in the Creative Units development). The Centre is also in discussion with the Education Department on the delivery of the basic Skills Programme through their digital storytelling projects.

As previously mentioned, the Arts Centre's relationship with other venues and creative partners is paramount. It has grown considerably over the last three years thanks to *Arts Outside Cardiff* and *Beacon* funding. The Centre is keen that this aspect of its work should continue to grow.

Relationships with other arts organisations and bodies such as Creu Cymru, The Circuit, Film Agency for Wales, Wales Cinema Exhibition, Academi, Engage and Engage Cymru, Wales at Venice Committee, Musicfest, DSCymru and other regional art centre's and venues continue to be fruitful.

Further strategic partnerships include Interreg - Culture Programme, Arts Council of Wales, Wales Arts International, British Council, Wales House and the Welsh Assembly Government.

The Arts Centre's routine contact with Arts Council staff in the Mid and West Wales office and other officers across the Arts Council is felt by the organisation to be positive and supportive. A continuing concern for the Arts Centre, and a point made in previous years, is the changing roles of theatres and arts centre resulting from *Arts Outside Cardiff* funding. They feel that the Arts Council should recognise these changes and acknowledge centres that now both produce, and take a significant role in professional development and include them within overall scope of English Language Theatre development.

Worries that *Arts Outside Cardiff* and *Beacon* funding will cease, be withdrawn or required elsewhere is also a constant concern. There also considerable and ongoing concern at the Arts Council's restriction to a single application within its funding schemes. The organisation believes that this has a detrimental impact on an arts centre the size of Aberystwyth particularly given its extensive and wide ranging programme, and sees this restriction as a serious obstacle to the research and development of potentially important projects for the future.

7. Concluding comments

Aberystwyth Arts Centre continues to be a busy and vibrant cultural hub in spite of the wider economic uncertainties. They continue to be an important regional centre, delivering an extensive artistic programme which clearly makes an essential contribution to the arts in Wales.

This organisations' approach to partnership development, and the relationships nurtured with the local community, reflect the extent of the organisation's imagination, ambition and effectiveness. This is an organisation that is currently fulfilling an important strategic development role in Wales, and their

success in achieving a Beacon award is testament to the quality of programme across artforms.

Within the context of standstill funding, it will be important that Aberystwyth Arts Centre maintains this delivery at a sustainable level without compromising on the quality of the work.