REPORT

A healthy heritage: the importance of culture in a sustainable Wales

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ABSTRACT

The groundbreaking Well-being of Future Generations Act of 2015 embeds the Sustainable Development Goals into all areas of public sector work in Wales. To maximise the health of its citizens and meet other well-being goals, public bodies are required to work in a way that is collaborative; involves local communities; focuses on prevention; is integrated; and takes a long-term view of decision-making. This report references the available empirical evidence of the benefits of the arts to health and well-being and provides examples of projects implemented in Wales, against the backdrop of an enabling legislative framework.

Keywords: ARTS, CROSS-SECTOR, HEALTH, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

INTRODUCTION

In 2019 the WHO Regional Office for Europe published a scoping review that synthesized evidence from across the world on the role that the arts can play in improving health and well-being (1). This systematic and comprehensive overview of the evidence base showing the beneficial links between culture and health was welcomed by all those who are working towards contributing positively to health and well-being. In the United Kingdom, several research projects have shown similar links between the arts and improved health, such as those featured in the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing report Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing, published in 2017 (2).

In Wales, work is ongoing to measure and assess the progress of specific projects that investigate the benefits of Arts in health. This article, however, aims simply to provide practical examples, and describe the supportive context of Wales’ Sustainable Development legislation, which has created connected, cross-cutting governance systems to stimulate and promote efforts to improve health. A short overview of the legislation is provided followed by a description of the actors involved in working to promote the health benefits of the arts at national level, and an outline of some of the projects that are happening at regional and local levels.

LEGALISATIVE CONTEXT

Legislation can be one of the most powerful tools available to direct long-term policy goals. It can be an effective lever for influencing change in society and provides a platform for directing action for the benefit of whole populations. In Wales, new legislation for sustainable development places duties on national and local public services, no matter what their specific responsibilities, to maximize their contribution to improving the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of the country; an expansion of the Brundtland definition of sustainable development to reflect the important role of cultural heritage and language (3). The welsh legislation, like the United Nation’s (UN’s) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), requires an interlinked approach, where the relationships between complex issues such as poverty, inclusivity, environment and climate change are recognized and addressed.

Public bodies, including the Welsh Government, have set, and now work towards, well-being objectives that demonstrate their contribution to seven statutory well-being goals that are
The goals serve as a translation of the globally agreed Sustainable Development Goals into the Welsh context and include a Wales which is globally responsible, prosperous, resilient, healthier, and more equal, with cohesive communities, and with a vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language. Public organizations are also required to execute their responsibilities through the Sustainable Development Principle or The Five Ways of Working, meaning that their actions are collaborative, integrated, preventative, long-term and involve the diversity of the population in the decisions that affect them (Fig. 1).

National reporting requirements are in place for the government and include the publicly available publications, Future Trends Report, which lists the major challenges to be addressed in Wales (4), and the annual Well-being of Wales report, which assesses progress towards 46 national indicators (5). These indicators include measures for a strong sense of community and culture: for example, volunteering, or participating in activities aligned to the arts, heritage and culture.

Accountability and scrutiny mechanisms are built into the legislation with a remit for the Auditor General for Wales to examine the extent to which public bodies have acted in accordance with the Sustainable Development Principle. His initial report outlined early progress (6) and now formal examinations have begun in each of the 44 public bodies. These examinations allow for in-depth analysis and discussion with staff at all levels to assess how each public body is applying the Sustainable Development Principle and The Five Ways of Working, how it has changed what it is doing, and how it involves and works with its service-users and stakeholders to deliver the aims of the legislation.

Similarly, the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales – a new role established in the Act, with a unique remit to challenge, advocate and support – has written about the importance of culture as making our lives worthwhile and linking the value of arts and creativity as beneficial for skills and employment, achieving prosperity and resilience (7). The Commissioner stated,

Public services, as the largest employer in Wales, have a huge contribution to make in developing and enhancing cultural well-being. Culture is the lifeblood of a vibrant society, expressed in the many ways we tell our stories, celebrate, remember the past, entertain ourselves, and imagine the future. Our creative expression helps define who we are and helps us see the world through the eyes of others.

She provides ongoing commentary on the public service response to the legislation and challenges public services to respond to the well-being goals, asking them to:

- develop national and local cultural strategies for their staff and communities;
- make the most of local assets such as libraries, play facilities, museums, galleries, sports facilities, arts organizations, natural resources and historic buildings;
- understand the potential of creativity to support change in policy-making and broader society, for example through targeted programmes of work that utilize cultural tools and cultural professionals to support wider issues such as community safety, literacy, poverty, environmental concerns and social isolation;
- utilize creative tools to address organizational and staff well-being issues, such as drama for stress management and yoga for relaxation;

![FIG. 1. THE WELL-BEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS (WALES) ACT 2015](source: reproduced with permission, from legislation.gov.uk, Richmond: The National Archives; 2015 (http://www.legislation.gov.uk/anaw/2015/2/contents))
• make the most of the business development in towns and cities by building on the cultural offer and creating partnerships that allow for culture to be more visible and present in daily life. The Commissioner has also recommended that public services fund legacy projects that show the long-term impact of investment in culture and language (8).

ARTS AND PUBLIC HEALTH

As a national body that falls under the remit of the Well-being of Future Generations Act, the Arts Council of Wales adapted their own corporate mission statement to become the arts at the heart of the life and well-being of the nation. With one of the seven well-being goals being A Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language, the Arts Council of Wales was perfectly placed to broker several public partnerships with other bodies in support of the Act. Out of a growing partnership with the health sector came a Memorandum of Understanding with the National Health Service (NHS) in Wales, to jointly promote arts and health work, increase understanding of the latest research and to include relevant arts and health project outcomes into broader evaluation frameworks wherever possible. This work is in keeping with one of the policy considerations highlighted in the WHO scoping review to, “Note the cross-sectoral nature of the arts and health field through strengthening structures and mechanisms for collaboration between culture, social care and health sectors, such as introducing programmes that are co-financed by different budgets” (1).

The study has supported the Wales Arts Health and Well-being Network (WAHWN) to deliver arts and health training work in Wales, share good practice, learn about sector developments and disseminate new research to the arts sector and beyond. This network has a focus on well-being and recovery in relation to mental health (particularly in children and young people), dementia, strengthening the arts in health evidence base, and researching sustainable financial models of practice (10). The Arts Council of Wales has also supported the establishment of a network of academic researchers with an interest in arts and health to collaborate better with the Higher Education sector and disseminate research findings more effectively.

ARTS AND HEALTH ROADSHOW

With a rich source of arts and health activity to showcase, two national bodies in Wales, the Arts Council of Wales and Public Health Wales (which has a national remit to protect and improve health and well-being and to reduce health inequalities), encouraged WAHWN and the Public Health Network Cymru to collaborate and develop a series of roadshows to showcase local arts and health practices across the country. This provided opportunities to bring together a wide range of practitioners, working with various art forms, to learn from each other, and share and disseminate good practice on using the arts to promote health and well-being in Wales. A report summarizing the rapidly evolving evidence base for this work and highlighting several projects from the roadshows has been produced (11). A selection of these projects, representing different art forms and indicative health and well-being benefits are listed below.

MUSIC

The benefits of music stem from both passive enjoyment and active participation. For example, singing for older people can affect morale, mental health related quality of life, loneliness, anxiety and depression (1). Music is being used in a variety of settings in Wales ranging from intensive care to social care and the community. Interventions include recitals, drumming workshops and singing in choirs.

MUSIC IN HOSPITALS & CARE (MIHC)

Source: reproduced with permission, from https://mihc.org.uk/wales/

Music in Hospitals & Care (MiHC) is a long-running project that aims to bring interactive live music sessions to people who are receiving care or treatment in a health-care setting. MiHC
states, “We all have a song or a favourite tune that reminds us of a special time or of a moment shared with someone else” and it has been shown that sharing the experience of a live musical performance can help reduce levels of anxiety, pain and depression, as well as break down social and cultural barriers (1, 2).

SING WITH US CHOIRS: TENOVUS CANCER CARE

Tenovus’ “Sing with Us” charity choirs are accessible to anyone affected by cancer; patients, survivors, carers or someone who has been bereaved through cancer are all welcome. Participants don't need to be able to read music to join the choir and the sessions are deliberately designed to be fun, inclusive and uplifting. The choir leaders are all professional musicians who work as part of the professional Cancer Support Team and alongside a volunteer network.

VISUAL ARTS AND CRAFTS

Whether it be painting, sculpture, crafting or other forms of visual and tactile artistry, these activities have long been adopted for rehabilitative and therapeutic value. Evidence shows that visual arts activities, of various kinds, can reduce depression and anxiety and increase confidence and self-esteem (1).

HEARTH GALLERY

The Hearth Gallery is a unique exhibition space set in the main hospital of Cardiff, the capital city of Wales. Supported by the Cardiff and Vale Health Board, the Gallery is the first of its kind in Wales, as it works with artists and community groups to host a diverse and extensive programme of exhibitions, which change every few weeks. The Heath Gallery aims to improve the environment in which patients live and are treated during their time in secondary care. It also improves the work environment for its staff.

POETRY, CREATIVE WRITING AND STORYTELLING

Both spoken and written word are outlets and mediums for expressing and influencing different aspects of health and well-being from engaging and supporting people living with dementia, through to tackling key social issues such as mental illness, homelessness and end of life care (1).

PEAK: CABAN SGRIBLIO

Caban Sgriblio (Scribbling Cabin) is a culture, health and well-being programme that works with groups of young people from schools and communities across a rural area of the Black Mountains in mid-Wales. The workshops give young people the opportunity to develop and explore their creativity through writing and film, and are designed to “unlock the potential” of children and young people between the ages of 8 and 18.

Caban Sgriblio has worked with 153 young people throughout the counties of Powys, Blaenau Gwent and Monmouthshire. Young people explore their lives and sense of place through poetry and film; building confidence and self-esteem,
CONCLUSION

The arts and health roadshow series in 2019 provided a snapshot of the multiple arts-based projects across Wales aimed at increasing health and well-being benefits among their participants. While findings from the United Kingdom All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing (2) – that the arts are instrumental in helping people to stay well, recover faster, manage long-term conditions and experience a better quality of life – had provided the rationale for this approach, further justification was subsequently found in the WHO scoping report’s call for “synergized collaboration between health and arts sectors that could realize the potential of the arts for improving global health” (1). Moreover, the majority of the projects presented, both here and in the WHO report, have been designed to tackle a broad view of health and its social determinants, to take a preventative and holistic approach, and to engage the citizen in a way that is empowering. Our presented projects provide examples of the Five Ways of Working required as part of the implementation of the well-being goals enshrined within the Welsh legislation.

By supporting these projects, our public bodies show how they are responding to the Well-being of Future Generations Act: that they are demonstrating lateral decision-making in policy development or service provision; that they are considering the impacts and consequences on a wider set of parameters; that they are working across sectors, with diverse stakeholders and citizens, to find sustainable solutions to interconnected economic, social, environmental and cultural challenges.

Conflicts of interest:

None declared

Disclaimer:

The authors alone are responsible for the views expressed in this publication and they do not necessarily represent the decisions or policies of the World Health Organization.

REFERENCES


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