

Bevan Foundation Written Evidence to the National Assembly; Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee inquiry into “The role of arts and culture in addressing poverty and social exclusion”

Introduction

The Bevan Foundation is an independent, charitable think-tank that develops solutions to Wales’ most challenging problems. We are grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Culture, Welsh Language and Communication Committee’s call for evidence. Our extensive work on poverty and inequality provides us with some insights into some of the difficulties faced by those living in poverty when seeking to participate in the arts. Our response draws on this experience, and is divided into three sections:

1. Participation in the production of arts and culture
2. Audience for arts and cultural activities
3. Working in arts and cultural activities

What is poverty?

By poverty we mean households which do not have enough income to meet their needs, as measured by the norms of society. Poverty is usually measured by household income, with the threshold being 60% of the median for specific types of household.

There is widespread agreement that the root causes of poverty are:

1. Being in work but on low pay
2. Not having a paid job e.g. because of unemployment, disability or illness, or caring responsibilities
3. A social security system that does not provide sufficient income to avoid poverty e.g. most working age benefits have been frozen since 2015
4. High costs especially housing costs.

Almost a quarter (24%) of the Welsh population live in relative income poverty.¹ The risk of poverty is not the same for all age groups, however. Whilst 20% of pensioners live in poverty, 24% of working age adults live in poverty and 28% of children live in poverty.² Children may be the age group at highest risk of poverty but, there are far more working age adults living in poverty in Wales. 420,000 working age adults live in poverty in Wales, compared to 180,000 children and 130,000 pensioners.³ Given the scale of poverty in Wales it is vital that any policy that is designed to improve participation within the arts is ambitious enough and targeted at the right people, if it is to make a meaningful contribution to the effort to solve poverty in Wales.

¹ <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Community-Safety-and-Social-Inclusion/Poverty/householdbelowaverageincome-by-year>

² *ibid*

³ <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Community-Safety-and-Social-Inclusion/Poverty/workingageadultsinrelativeincomepoverty-by-economicstatusofhousehold>;
<https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Community-Safety-and-Social-Inclusion/Poverty/childreninrelativeincomepoverty-by-economicstatusofhousehold>;
<https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Community-Safety-and-Social-Inclusion/Poverty/pensionersinrelativeincomepoverty-by-familytype>

Understanding the economic situation of those living in poverty provides an insight to some of the difficulties faced by families trapped in poverty when seeking to engage with the arts. The UK Government's Department for Work and Pensions calculates the poverty threshold every year - the most recently available data is for 2016/17 and is set out in the table below.

Table 1

Household type	60% of median weekly income after housing costs
Couple no children	£255
Single no children	£148
Couple with two children aged 5 and 14	£413
Single with two children aged 5 and 14	£306

Households Below Average Income 1994/95 to 2016/17 The Income Distribution: Time Series. Table 2.4ts: Equivalent money values of overall distribution mean, median, and 60 per cent of median income for different family types in 2016/17 prices, United Kingdom

Families living in poverty must cover the cost of their food, energy bills, essential clothing and transport for less than the thresholds set out above, leaving families with very little money to spend on cultural activities. Despite this, there is evidence to suggest families living in poverty do share an interest in the arts with higher income households. In the 2017/18 financial year, families in the lowest income decile spent 11% of their income on recreational and cultural activities whilst the twentieth percentile spent 12% of such activities.⁴ The average for all households was 13%, with no percentile spending more than 14% of their income on such activities.⁵ Whilst there may be no great difference in proportional terms between what low income households spend on recreation and culture, and higher income households, by virtue of having less money, those living in poverty have less to spend on such activities.

1. Production of the arts and culture

There is limited research that suggests that improving participation in the arts can be part of the solution to poverty, although on its own it has little effect. Involving people who live in poverty in the production of cultural events can lead to increased confidence and the development of new skills.⁶ This can provide an important step in encouraging those who are currently not in work to seek employment opportunities and it can also give confidence to those who are already employed to seek progression opportunities, boosting their incomes. Involving people from a diverse range of backgrounds in the production of culture can also promote greater community cohesion, and provide people living in poverty with an opportunity to develop greater social networks.⁷

There is mixed evidence on how social networks impact on people who live in poverty. Research suggests that while people who have access to strong social networks do have access to greater financial and emotional support than people who don't, such social networks do not, as of

⁴ Family spending in the UK: financial year ending March 2017, Table A5: Household expenditure as a percentage of total expenditure by gross income decile group

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/social_inclusion/docs/studyculture_leaflet_en.pdf

⁷ *ibid*

themselves, overcome the challenges faced by those on low incomes.⁸ It is important therefore, that any programmes that seek to provide opportunities for individuals to get involved in the production of cultural events do not just focus on developing social networks, if they are to play an effective role in providing solutions for poverty.

In seeking to provide greater opportunities for families living in poverty to get involved in the production of the arts, it is important to remember that over half of people living in poverty in Wales live in a household where at least one adult is in work. This means that families must fit any recreational activities around their work life. It is not only those who are in work who are time pressured. People claiming certain benefits or who receive universal credit are now required to apply for a number of jobs every week and occasionally attend training courses and meetings. Failure to do so can lead a family to face sanctions which would see their income reduced. Organising events during the day on weekdays is therefore likely to benefit a very small proportion of people living in poverty in Wales. It is therefore important that organisations that carry out cultural participation projects do so with a degree of flexibility so that they can involve the communities they are working within to shape how such projects are delivered so that as many people as possible benefit.

Cuts to services have also had a significant impact on the opportunities available for those living in poverty to engage with culture through structured schemes. The number of adults aged twenty and over in either full time or part time further education in Wales dropped by a quarter between 2012/13 and 2016/17, due to cuts to adult learning.⁹ Cuts to music education in schools and to the support offered to those who need help in buying equipment such as music instruments and cameras has also created a new barrier for children growing up in poor households. The loss of these formal structures may make it more difficult to engage with those living in poverty. Cuts to such services may also mean that a number of people who could benefit from being involved cultural productions may only have very limited experience of playing a music instrument or operating a camera for example. It is therefore crucial that any production that is developed with the aim of engaging with people who live in poverty is done in a way that allows people to feel comfortable in that environment, regardless of their experience or skills.

Audience for arts and culture?

While there is limited research that suggests that improving participation in the arts can be part of the solution to poverty, it is less clear whether being in the audience for cultural events has the same benefits as being involved in its production. Whilst being an audience member at regular cultural activities can be an effective way of developing social networks,¹⁰ strong social networks as of themselves do not overcome the challenges faced by families living in poverty. Given that being in the audience provides individuals with fewer opportunities to learn new skills and to develop their confidence than being involved in the production of the arts, it would appear prudent that projects that seek to find a solution to poverty through the arts should focus on increasing participation in the production rather than the consumption of culture.

As was highlighted above, families living in poverty spend a similar percentage of their income on recreational and cultural activities as families who are on higher incomes. Families who are trapped

⁸ <https://dspace.stir.ac.uk/bitstream/1893/21042/1/JRF%20final%20published%20report.pdf>

⁹ <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Post-16-Education-and-Training/Further-Education-and-Work-Based-Learning/Learners/Further-Education/uniquelearnersenrolledfurthereducationinstitutions-by-age-modeoflearning-gender>

¹⁰ <https://dspace.stir.ac.uk/bitstream/1893/21042/1/JRF%20final%20published%20report.pdf>

in poverty do face some significant barriers when seeking to become part of an audience for an arts event, however. One such barrier are transport costs. For example, it would cost a family of four, £25.50 to travel by train from Ebbw Vale to Cardiff for a free event. That's a significant sum of money for a family living in poverty and will be prohibitive for many. If a family decided that it was worth spending the money to attend the event, it could have knock on consequences for local cultural events. Any family from Ebbw Vale that does decide to take up the offer will have £25.50 less to spend on cultural activities in their own community.

A related issue is that in many parts of Wales public transport provision is limited, especially in the evening. This means that there may be some families, living in poverty who do wish to engage with a cultural activity, but cannot do so, simply as they can not physically get to the event. It is vital therefore that any programmes that seek to improve access to culture for families living in poverty, be that through production or forming part of an audience, does so in people's own communities and in a way that removes barriers to as many people as possible.

3. Working in arts and cultural activities

Whilst boosting cultural participation can play a role in solving poverty, there are issues with the sector that does limit the positive impact that it can have on improving people's lives. Over half of those who work in the Arts, Entertainment and Recreation Industry earn less than the real living wage.¹¹ The real living wage is calculated based on how much people need to get by and in 2018/19, stands at £9 an hour in Wales. In 2018, the 60th percentile of those who work within the industry in Wales only earned £9.02 an hour, excluding overtime.¹² Whilst not everyone who is on a low pay lives in poverty, earning below the real living wage does increase an individual's risk of living in poverty. The impact of low pay within the industry as it attempts to provide a solution to poverty is twofold.

First, given the prevalence of low pay within the Arts, Entertainment and Recreation Industry, individuals who develop new skills through their engagement with culture and who may, as a result of these experiences, seek employment within the sector, could find it difficult to find employment that is not low paid. Given that over half of those living in poverty in Wales live in working households, increasing employment within the sector as a result of participation is not a guaranteed route out of poverty for a family.

Second, given the high number of staff who are paid less than the real living wage within the industry there is a possibility that some of those who are employed at cultural events or productions where attempts are made to boost participation from families who live in poverty, may well be living in poverty themselves. We therefore believe that it is vital that the Welsh Government seeks assurances from all grant holders that they pay their staff the real living wage, to avoid the situation where projects that are seeking to find a solution to poverty are themselves perpetuating the problem.

¹¹ ASHE Table 5.6a Hourly Pay Excluding Overtime – Industry

¹² *ibid*