

Wales Arts International

Joined up approach by funding agencies helps
support international engagement and mobility of Welsh artists

Background

Wales Arts International (WAI) was established in 1997 as a partnership between Arts Council of Wales and the British Council, with a view to promoting knowledge about contemporary culture from Wales and encouraging international contact, exchange and collaboration. It was considered that Wales' external profile and the development of international work would be best served through a joint agency that provided a single access point for presenters, programmers and cultural professionals. By collaborating in this way, limited resources could be pooled to maximise benefits for the arts in Wales. A new agreement between the two bodies to further promote Welsh arts abroad was signed in April 2008.

By way of illustration, the EU enlargement process in 2004 was marked by an exhibition of work by Lithuanian artists at the Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff, and a reciprocal exhibition of Welsh artists at the Contemporary Art Centre in Vilnius. The same year a contemporary dance festival 'Migrations', in Llandudno, North Wales, hosted companies from France, Norway, Switzerland and Turkey. In 2005/06, WAI, in conjunction with the British Council, supported a programme of work presented by Welsh professionals in visual arts, theatre, music, literature and film across the Czech Republic. WAI also deploys resources for its own strategic use, including an exchange programme between artists in Wales and Quebec. Unsurprisingly, Catalonia is also one of WAI's strategic priorities.

A range of promotional material is provided by WAI online and offline to profile artform practice in Wales, often to support the showcasing of Welsh arts or for exchange programmes and residencies.

How it works

One of WAI's main tasks is the operation of an *International Opportunities Fund*, open to professional artists and arts organisations in Wales. For research and exploratory visits overseas, the support is primarily for travel costs. Funding is directed to overall costs in the case of projects, with a ceiling of GBP 3 000.

The International Opportunities Fund is an open scheme for the arts from Wales and for Welsh presenters to seek work in situ overseas.

Among the factors taken into account when assessing applications are:

- likely delivery of high quality, contemporary work which has the potential to contribute to artform development in Wales;
- professional experience of the applicant;
- potential for new work that has an enduring or sustainable value;
- a commitment to international exchange and collaboration expressed through clear objectives;
- an enthusiasm to engage with international practitioners and networks.

In the first decade or so of the partnership, WAI has helped artists obtain residencies abroad and extend their contacts, as well as providing exchange opportunities with foreign practitioners. In the eight years from 2000/01 to 2007/08, 593 projects have been supported through the International Opportunities Fund at a cost of GBP 496 200. In 2007/08 specifically, 80 projects were supported at a total cost of 80 000 GBP. Additional support for mobility of artists and international projects has been provided through WAI's strategic programmes.

Results

Following a consultation exercise with the arts community, WAI has now launched a five year strategy, *Creating 2013*, which indicates the steps it will take to promote connections between the arts sector in Wales and other countries. Key to the strategy and the partnership will be three priorities:

1. Maximising international opportunities for the arts in Wales;
2. Increasing investment in WAI's programme of activities;
3. Ensuring international impact and recognition for arts from Wales.

Critical to the successful delivery of these aims will be the ability of the WAI / British Council partnership to raise new funds for international work. The intention is to develop a new international investment fund that will act as leverage for new sources of international funding. Stimulating private support for international projects from foundations and businesses with affinity to the arts in Wales is also on the agenda through proposals to offer matching funding. Also integral to the strategy is the aim to develop, share and transfer knowledge and expertise between local and international networks; and to ensure quality of the arts initiatives. A European cultural desk is to be created at WAI to inform artists and arts organisations of European opportunities. A new international adviser's panel is also being established to support the work and implementation of the strategy.

In common with small countries and regions worldwide that exist as part of larger states, Wales, with a population of only around three million, is continually seeking to ensure that the profile of its culture and language is not submerged by the dominance of the majority (in this case England within the UK). Identifying and capitalising on opportunities to engage internationally has been a problem for many Welsh professionals, which WAI, despite the relatively modest funds at its disposal, has helped to address. WAI may be a model which other small countries may find appropriate.

Sources

Wales Arts International: <http://www.wai.org>

Article by Sarah Miloudi in the *Western Mail*, 17 April 2008

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Various Annual Reports of Arts Council of Wales

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