

Venues for Community Participation

The Welsh Sports Association and Creative Lives have concerns about venues for community participation across Wales.

Both the cultural sectors and sports sectors are reporting that the impact of the pandemic has exacerbated existing issues around access to suitable venues for community groups as they return to activity.

In person activity is key to reaching a large number of demographic groups, and there are clear benefits in reducing loneliness and isolation within the community.

Key factors

Across sport and culture, there are similar requirements when picking a venue:

1. Accessibility
2. Location and travel arrangements
3. Availability of equipment and/or storage areas
4. Affordability
5. Flexible opening times

Current issues

As we emerge from the pandemic volunteer led community groups are reporting additional issues accessing venues or finding suitable venues.

In places, this has been because venues have permanently closed or fallen into disrepair. Elsewhere venues may have changed the way they operate – lowering capacities, or finding new sources of revenue. Some groups are also reporting that their traditional venue is no longer seen as suitable given heightened awareness of the need for good ventilation and physical distancing.

Spiralling energy costs are having a significant impact on venues' cost base, and this is almost certainly going to result in fee increases where these are charged. Some community groups will not be able to meet these costs.

There are ongoing issues relating to capacity. Some venues have lowered their capacity through the pandemic and may keep numbers lower than

pre pandemic levels. This has led to some groups reporting that they have had to split into two in order to continue meeting safely (thereby incurring additional hire costs), whereas others are having to turn away new members once they have reached venue capacity.

We are also seeing issues around staff shortages leading to restricted opening hours for venues, or a lower number of people able to use venues.

Rates of return to activity are mixed, with some demographic groups returning more slowly. There is reported nervousness about returning indoors. Around 20% of participants in sport in Wales report concerns around returning to indoor activity – we might assume that this could be abated in more modern and better ventilated spaces and invest accordingly.

Continued closure of public and community owned venues means groups are turning to other venues to operate, often these are more expensive to use – especially in sport, meaning some users are being priced out of activity.

Arts and Culture issues

Involvement in community-based creative activity can bring considerable benefits to wellbeing and social connection, and the loss of communal arts practice during the pandemic was profound.

Creative Lives / Bywydau Creadigol conducted a survey of creative groups and their venue needs in late 2021. We found a wide array of issues as creative groups started to reconvene after the restrictions of the pandemic, but the overall picture is that local creative groups are struggling to find suitable venues in which to meet.

The vast majority of creative groups don't own their own buildings, and after two years of inactivity, many creative groups have experienced a substantial drop in income through the absence of members' subscription fees and ticket sales, whilst incurring increased costs to return to in-person activity.

Groups reported difficulties finding large enough venues with adequate ventilation; restrictions on their activities or participant numbers; and finding accessible venues at a reasonable cost.

Sport specific issues

With some venues lying fallow for extended periods of time, they have fallen into disrepair and face substantial remediation costs that the community will not be able to meet.

A significant proportion of volunteers have left sporting activity, and are unlikely to return because habits have changed. Some sports are reporting significantly depressed coaching and supervision capacity which is further hampering a return to activity.

Some sports own their own venues, though this is not widely the case. Delivery takes place in a variety of settings from Local Authority owned and managed leisure centres, to community centres and private gyms. Most sports and physical activity delivery relies on a host operator of space.

Faith groups

Some faith groups hire venues provided by others and would endorse all the comments about the difficulties being faced in hiring and using Community venues post-pandemic.

Other faith groups are providers of such venues. In some areas, especially rural areas but also some parts of the Valleys and some suburban areas, a faith group may be the main or only provider of community facilities to others. Faith group providers are affected by the increases in costs referred to above, and the need to make their building hire operation financially viable (as charities, faith groups cannot usually provide facilities at a loss for users who do not share their charitable purposes). Faith groups, being mainly volunteer led, have also suffered from the loss of key volunteers in the past two years, due to age, illness, or changed habits. This is one reason (amongst many) for some faith venues being cautious in re-opening their hiring arrangements for external users.

Solutions

While many community groups responded imaginatively to the pandemic restrictions by meeting remotely, there is now an urgent need to facilitate the safe restarting of physical and creative activity in person. There is a concurrent opportunity to build on the increased public interest in both physical health and everyday creativity that occurred during the national lockdowns.

It is crucial that physical and creative activity is supported to rebuild and thrive, and that public policy decisions do not adversely impact the ability of people to undertake their sports and creativity together.

Welsh Sports Association and Creative Lives would welcome a dialogue with Welsh Government about potential solutions, which might include:

- Sport Wales Be Active fund provides small grants to community groups to help them meet cost challenges, this has been put to good use through the pandemic and has helped several groups meet the upfront costs of restarting activity. This model could be trialled in the arts and culture sector, as well as other sectors such as faith.
- An audit of community venues across Wales, to understand the scale of the issues facing us in terms of access, state of repair and threat to continued operation.