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**The creative turn in evidence for public health: community  
and arts-based methodologies**

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Community group, taken by photographer Joseph Singh

433x288mm (300 x 300 DPI)

Review

Data	Participants	Details
<b>Interviews</b>	13 working age people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Semi structured interviews, voice recorded, lasting approximately 40 minutes each.</li> </ul>
<b>Interviews</b>	5 older people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Semi structured interviews, voice recorded, lasting approximately 30 minutes each.</li> </ul>
<b>Video interviews</b>	38 Year 4/5 pupils	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pairs or trios of pupils were interviewed in the school yard in a shelter. Interviews were video recorded and lasted approximately 30 minutes each;</li> <li>Individual pupils gave shorter 'vox pop' style interviews about what they valued about their community and what they would like to change.</li> </ul>
<b>Group discussion</b>	15 older people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Using photo-elicitation, the group talked about their memories and experiences of living in the area. Old photographs of the area prompted discussion. The sessions was recorded using hand-written notes and audio recording and lasted approximately 2 hours</li> </ul>
<b>Group discussions</b>	2 x groups of young people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One group was held at the local high school, the other at a youth club in the community;</li> <li>Participants watched a short news film about their community and responded to it in a group discussion which was audio recorded.</li> </ul>
<b>Group discussion</b>	8 working age women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A 2 hour group discussion recorded using hand-written notes (no recording equipment)</li> </ul>
<b>Poems</b>	27 Year 4/5 pupils	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Led by their teacher, pupils wrote individual poems about their town, following on from class discussions the researcher had facilitated.</li> </ul>
<b>Song/music video</b>	27 Year 4/5 pupils	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>With the help of a songwriter and musician, the class compiled their individual poems into a song, for which they also created a music video.</li> </ul>
<b>Drawings</b>	27 Year 4/5 pupils	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Each pupil drew a picture of themselves 'now' and 'in the future', which were used as prompts in the video interviews described above.</li> </ul>
<b>Photographs</b>	10 Year 10 pupils	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In weekly sessions, pupils were trained in photography and asked to take photographs of their community which were then discussed as a group.</li> </ul>

For Peer Review

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3 **The creative turn in evidence for public health: community and arts-based**  
4 **methodologies**  
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**Abstract**Background

We propose that arts based methodologies can be of value in the production and exchange of evidence in supporting public health related policy. This paper reports on a collaborative piece of work resulting from two projects which took place in a former coal mining town in South Wales.

Methods

We used a participatory framework whereby researchers, community members and artists co-produced 'evidence' through the creative arts to inform public policy. We collected a range of data using a number of different techniques. including interviews, focus groups and observation, but also included an extensive range of creative activities.

Results

The data provided a diverse range of perspectives on how people of different ages live their lives. The People's Platform was a performance-based debate which was the culmination of the collaboration. The show involved a series of short performances with time for facilitated discussion in-between. It was felt that the show facilitated knowledge exchange on health and wellbeing issues that are usually difficult to express and understand through traditional forms of evidence.

Conclusion

Whilst arts-based approaches are not free from risk, they offer an alternative form of knowledge as a necessary complement to the range of data available to policy makers.

**Key words:**

Methods, Public Health, Communities

**Introduction: Other ways of knowing**

In public policy development (including health) there is often a disconnect between the available data on the one hand, and both the wider social, material and cultural contexts, and the everyday lived experiences of health and wellbeing on the other. This is often exacerbated by neo-liberal approaches to policy that focus on individual characteristics and capacities and, in the context of public health, a narrow focus on deprivation and individual lifestyle and behaviour<sup>1,2</sup>. In the context of steep income and related health inequalities, the results are public health interventions and approaches that fail or fall short of their objectives because they do not resonate with the priorities and lived experiences of the people at whom they are aimed. Like others who have noted the international shift towards what Parkinson and White<sup>3</sup> refer to as the a shared agenda of re-imagining public health, we are interested in drawing on local knowledge as evidence for public health interventions which incorporate the overlapping spheres of time and place; ways of living; health and well-being and inequality. This temporal, spatial and holistic approach moves us away from traditional evidence-based approaches that are quantitative and probabilistic<sup>4-6</sup> to methods that bridge the gaps between data, the production of 'living knowledge'<sup>7</sup> and interventions. Furthermore, it is argued that they provide alternative ways of engaging different communities in conversations about the meaning and significance of different kinds of evidence. This paper proposes that arts based methodologies can be of value in the production and exchange of evidence in supporting public health related policy. In particular, this paper provides insight into the Welsh policy context and highlights arts based methods used to support the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act.

Whilst attempts to quantify aspects of the social and material context are important<sup>8</sup>, qualitative methods are also important in exploring the hidden features of lived experience, the meaning of contextual factors related to health and wellbeing, and the limits and possibilities of health interventions. Whilst this type of evidence is still often considered inferior to quantitative evidence, the contribution of qualitative studies to public health is increasingly being recognised<sup>9-12</sup>. What remains clear is the need for other ways of knowing and understanding people's lives, not amenable to numeric calculation, which enable us to understand how people living under varying conditions actively engage and resist the demands and affordances of social and economic change.

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5 In the field of social sciences for example, this includes research approaches and methods  
6 that draw on inventive<sup>13</sup>, live<sup>14</sup>, and real time<sup>15</sup>, all aimed at capturing the complexity of  
7 everyday life. New ways of capturing data and knowledge are developed through the  
8 integration of multiple methods and tools which are used within participative and socially  
9 situated contexts. In a similar view, and in keeping with a growing body of work on  
10 sociality<sup>16</sup> our attention is rooted on the approaches and methods that allow for a focus on  
11 the nuanced and diverse aspects of everyday health and wellbeing.  
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19 In this paper we will draw on a research project in which data were both collected and  
20 communicated using methods derived from arts practice. The researchers, not being artists,  
21 worked alongside a community arts project to generate data and then, together with a  
22 national theatre organisation, co-produced a performance-based dialogue about everyday  
23 wellbeing to inform recently implemented legislation on wellbeing. In this paper we go  
24 beyond qualitative methodologies and explore the contribution that *arts-based research* can  
25 make to debates in public health, and how arts-based knowledge continues to make  
26 problematic our understanding of what counts as evidence<sup>3,17</sup>.  
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### 34 35 **The value of arts**

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37 There is a significant body of work that acknowledges the therapeutic value of different  
38 kinds of participation in arts based activity<sup>18-22</sup>. However there is an emerging literature on  
39 arts based research practice<sup>23</sup> including in health research<sup>24</sup>. This research integrates arts  
40 practices into the methods of engagement and data collection as well as knowledge  
41 production and exchange. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the field of arts-based research has  
42 received some critique, as the boundaries of what constitutes 'research' are being pushed  
43 and blurred. For example, David Pariser<sup>25</sup> has challenged arts-based research by arguing  
44 that research is a 'quest for truth' and that art can make no truth claims. Pariser highlights  
45 the lack of peer review in the field, which he argues leaves the arts relatively unchecked  
46 compared to many other research approaches. Arts-based research has also been  
47 challenged for relying too heavily on personal testimony, rather than inviting "sceptical  
48 scrutiny and criticism"<sup>26</sup>.  
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3 However, as Seigesmund<sup>27</sup> points out, the arts are useful for addressing ‘secondary  
4 ignorance’, where we do not know what we do not know. The arts can be a mechanism to  
5 shift perceptions and move to a position of ‘primary ignorance’, where we DO know what  
6 we do not know, and are therefore more open to addressing a need for growth.  
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12 What arts-based research does is to place emphasis on embodied responses to the world  
13 and non-conventional ways of meaning-making<sup>28</sup>, with attention and experimentation of  
14 form and creative presentation in terms of both research processes and outputs<sup>29</sup>.  
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16 Sullivan<sup>30</sup>, in problematising research that seeks to explain human behaviour in order to  
17 establish causal pathways which can then be re-created to produce desired behaviours,  
18 makes the case for arts practice as research by arguing that there is a gap in current  
19 knowledge derived solely from quantitative and qualitative research methods. Often using  
20 participatory methodologies, arts-based research has been used to research with people  
21 and communities in more considerate and empathetic ways. Boydell et al.<sup>17</sup> argue further  
22 that it is important to pay attention to the spaces within which different types of knowledge  
23 are produced. This resonates and extends some of the work of Elliott and Williams<sup>31</sup> who, in  
24 thinking about the knowledge that both a public sociology<sup>32</sup> and citizen science<sup>33</sup> might  
25 contribute, argue that we need ‘new knowledge spaces’ within which contentious public  
26 issues can be discussed. They highlight the implications of these pluralistic epistemological  
27 environments for different forms of expertise.  
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#### 40 **Wales: a devolved policy context**

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42 In Wales, health is a devolved policy area and has had more recent powers to create new  
43 legislation. The Wellbeing of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015 has seven broad  
44 priorities, or wellbeing goals, for the future of Wales, which it expects all public bodies to  
45 address through their practice<sup>1</sup>. This requires newly created Public Service Boards  
46 (comprising Local Authorities but also a range of other organisations) to conduct a wellbeing  
47 assessment of its population, and to set ‘wellbeing objectives’. The quality and range of  
48 evidence available in order for these tasks to be completed is therefore crucial, as they will  
49 shape the work and activities of all public bodies in Wales. The legislation also requires  
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57 <sup>1</sup> A prosperous Wales, a resilient Wales, a healthier Wales, a more equal Wales, a Wales of Cohesive  
58 Communities, a Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language and a globally responsible Wales.  
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3 Public Service Boards to implement the Act by involving the diverse communities in the area  
4 that the public bodies serve. This, more clearly than other forms of legislation, connects the  
5 requirement for evidence alongside that of engaging publics. The legislation calls for forms  
6 of evidence that provide a different understanding of local contexts through the lens of  
7 some constructs (e.g. resilience, cohesion, wellbeing and culture) which require a more  
8 nuanced understanding of local context and the structures that regulate and support  
9 wellbeing in people's everyday lives. From a public health perspective it also provides a  
10 mechanism to connect the wellbeing goals within a social determinants of health  
11 framework.  
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21 In Wales the focus, since the National Assembly of Wales was created, has been on  
22 participation as the driver for change<sup>34,35</sup>. More recently, as in other devolved  
23 administrations and in research, there has also been a turn to co-production as a way of  
24 delivering services, driving innovation and creating living knowledge<sup>7</sup>. In Wales the then  
25 Minister for Health and Social Services, Mark Drakeford, also highlighted its democratic  
26 potential writing (in a guide to co-production) that 'our ambition is not for co-production to  
27 replace the state, but for it to democratise and animate it.'<sup>36</sup> In other papers, available for  
28 readers to draw their own conclusions, we have offered a more critical perspective on co-  
29 production but what it has done is to enable us to acknowledge that academic knowledge is  
30 part of a wider ecology of knowledge<sup>37,38</sup>. This is particularly the case with knowledge of  
31 local context which requires different knowledge holders, and different methods, to  
32 generate knowledge of the local in the context of wider structural changes.  
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#### 44 **A case study in arts research practice**

45 This paper reports on the role that arts practice played (through co-production with  
46 community and national arts organisations) in one case study out of five across the UK in a  
47 study entitled *Representing Communities: developing the creative power of people to*  
48 *improve health and wellbeing*. In this case study the focus was on a post-industrial area in  
49 the south Wales valleys. It is a place which has become highly stigmatised through national  
50 and local media stories and programmes alongside local profiles which place it as one of the  
51 most deprived in the UK. In the context of current welfare policy which focuses on  
52 conditionality and sanctions, marginality and poverty are framed in terms of failure<sup>39</sup>.  
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3 Whereas 'working class' could previously have been a resource for positive identities and  
4 action (for instance through workplace institutes and trade unions) the loss of an industrial  
5 base and its wider impact on the loss of opportunities for social, economic and civic  
6 participation, means that places, as alternative forms of identity construction, are risky<sup>40</sup>.  
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8 Stigmatised places, in particular, are fragile bases for asserting positive collective identities  
9 that could challenge structural inequalities, as places themselves are framed as the  
10 problem<sup>41,42</sup>. It was these framings of inequality that this project sort to challenge, both  
11 through new data as well as by creating a space in which alternative ways of understanding  
12 local wellbeing could be articulated by local people to representatives of public bodies.  
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21 However, given the focus on art as a process to generate new forms of knowledge and  
22 understanding of health and wellbeing, the study could not be conducted by academic  
23 researchers alone. The focus on arts and creativity, along with the theme of health and  
24 wellbeing and the geographical location of the study, facilitated a number of university-  
25 community partnerships. One partner was a bi-lingual arts project called *POSSIB: Lleisiau*  
26 *Mewn Celf / Voices in Art* supported by the Big Lottery and based in a Welsh language  
27 cultural centre. The purpose of *POSSIB* was to explore issues relating to health and  
28 wellbeing through arts participation, exploration and co-creation. Activities were focused  
29 on school aged children, their parents and working aged men in the area. For three years,  
30 the two projects worked in partnership, developing a number of activities and events. Both  
31 used a participatory framework whereby researchers, community members and artists co-  
32 produced 'evidence' (or 'intelligence') through the creative arts to inform public policy. A  
33 range of data were collected, from people of all ages accessed through schools and a range  
34 of community based projects, using a number of techniques (see Table 1). These started  
35 with traditional qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups and observation.  
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37 However, as the research developed, arts-based practices and methods became used more  
38 productively to 'articulate' the thoughts and experiences that people found 'unsayable' in  
39 terms of the everyday, and often mundane, experiences of local wellbeing. In particular,  
40 wellbeing was seen as relational; not just in terms of the residents themselves, but also the  
41 craft-like contributions of community development workers to the fabric and feel of  
42 everyday life. Many of the children and adults who participated in the research revealed  
43 moments when community development workers, employed as part of the Welsh  
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3 Government's Communities First anti-poverty programme<sup>2</sup>, subtly intervened in their lives  
4 by creating connections, ideas or resources that helped at a particular moments in time.  
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6 Digital stories showed and narrated the importance of particular places and people in  
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8 ensuring that moments of sociability and shared enjoyment were part of the pattern of their  
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10 week. In the background, the street-level practices of care, the importance of which were  
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12 unseen through the reporting structures to Government, were enacted like invisible thread,  
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14 holding livable lives together. Photographs chosen as part of one digital story about the  
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16 community centre showed a group of older people smiling and sharing lunch – the  
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18 community development worker a faded figure in the background (see Figure 1 below).  
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21 Figure 1: Image of cooking group

22 [see separate sheet]  
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26 The data provided a diverse range of perspectives on how people of different ages take part  
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28 in the sociality of everyday life and findings covered diverse subjects including the physical  
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30 environment, housing, volunteering, the jobcentre, benefits sanctions, drug misuse,  
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32 vandalism, social and informal support, networks, community spirit, future aspirations and  
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34 pride. These were experiments 'with' people, the difference being that people were always  
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36 the producers and owners of the arts (data) they produced.  
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38 Please see table 1 for an overview of the data:  
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40 Table 1: Overview of data

41 [See separate sheet]  
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### 45 **The People's Platform**

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47 Whilst photographs, poems, songs and stories were useful for gathering data, they were  
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49 limited as forms of knowledge exchange. For instance photographs depicting, on the one  
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51 hand loneliness, and on the other hand the conviviality of public spaces, invited private  
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53 responses from people visiting an exhibition over a two week period. In seeking to push  
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55 beyond some of these limitations, throughout the project researchers were in conversation  
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57 <sup>2</sup> The Communities First programme in Wales is currently being phased out and will no longer exist from March  
58 2018  
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3 with National Theatre Wales (NTW), itself an organisation that is self-reflective of its  
4 responsibilities both to engage with different publics but also to produce high quality  
5 theatre. As a form of co-produced research the emphasis was on the forms of knowledge  
6 that could be generated and exchanged through the medium of theatre. Through NTW a  
7 writer/dramaturg and director were commissioned to work with the data and community  
8 members to create a performance. The director and writer worked with a group of working  
9 age people, some of whom had already taken part in interviews and others who were new  
10 to the project. Through workshops, the style and mode of engagement in the production  
11 were established. Another director was also commissioned to establish a 'Young Company'  
12 involving pupils at the local high school as the highly physical and emotive processes of  
13 creating a finished performance highlighted the need for smaller spaces for sharing and  
14 expressing ideas and experiences in ways that felt 'safe'.  
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26 The details of the rationale, process and outputs of the People's Platform is reported  
27 elsewhere<sup>37</sup> but it provided an opportunity to create a space, a sensory landscape, which  
28 embodied the spirit of the place and in which local people in the project felt comfortable. It  
29 was held in a social club, and fragments of data were thematised and performed around the  
30 audience who were sat at T-shaped tables to encourage discussion. At each table was a  
31 community member who had been trained in facilitation techniques and a mix of  
32 community and policy audience members – around 200 in total. Even the set design and  
33 lighting were designed to reflect the nature of the data and purpose of the event; to  
34 generate discussion of the wellbeing goals, and local people's involvement in, the Wellbeing  
35 of Future Generations Act.  
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45 Most of the performance was through monologues and characters that were built from  
46 interviews and data throughout the project. The characters were historically located and  
47 the problems and joys they narrated were familiar to local people. They could not have  
48 come from 'anywhere' but their stories touched on universal experiences of how poverty  
49 and inequality impact, and are managed, in everyday life. For instance 'Angharad' talks  
50 about the everyday struggles of being a mother, bringing up her boys, struggling with  
51 chronic depression and negotiating the resources that appear and disappear. As a character  
52 she performed and brought alive, cognitively and emotionally, the importance of the fragile  
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3 organisational and interpersonal resources that have kept her going in times of trouble. Her  
4 monologue (through its context and the way in which she performed her story) challenged  
5 the discourses of resilience which focus on individual characteristics and qualities at the  
6 neglect of public and relational structures and resources. In witnessing the data through a  
7 shared aesthetic experience, audience members were able to exchange knowledge and  
8 dialogue in a space where professional and lay roles were not as visible as in other, more  
9 formal, spaces for discussion (such as consultation groups, AM surgeries, or town hall  
10 meetings). Representatives from the National Assembly for Wales and from National  
11 Theatre Wales commented on the diversity of audience members and the depth of  
12 discussion resulting from the show. This demonstrates the role that research can play in  
13 community development, public policy making and arts and culture; the show brought value  
14 to people at all of these levels, as the feedback demonstrates. The feedback from audience  
15 members, ranging from representatives from the National Assembly of Wales, Welsh  
16 Government, Local Authority, Arts Council and Westminster, was that the show was able to  
17 convey powerful messages about everyday health and wellbeing and that it was able to  
18 challenge stereotypical views held about particular groups. Messages left on post-it notes,  
19 postcards and tablecloths conveyed a wide range of responses, including reflections on the  
20 current community conditions and the structural factors which shape health and wellbeing;  
21 suggestions of what the community needs in order to improve health and wellbeing; the  
22 existing strengths of the community, and emotional responses to the show.<sup>3</sup>  
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40 The new Chair of the Arts Council in Wales, reflecting on the role of arts and, in this case,  
41 theatre in a post-Brexit world wrote:  
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45 There's a well-lit mini boxing ring with a fighter training; a washing-line monologue about a  
46 mother and her teenage son. Issues are raised which stimulate discussions at tables around  
47 the club lounge. It's called The People's Platform and it's focused on celebrating the people  
48 of this feisty, talented and massively disadvantaged town.<sup>41</sup>  
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57 <sup>3</sup> See link to a film which provides a narrative of how some of the local people, performers and audience  
58 members responded <http://bit.ly/2qn5Akr>  
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Perhaps it is not surprising that a national body with a responsibility for commissioning arts should articulate the social value of art in this way. After all the cultural sector is under pressure to demonstrate its public value in the context of cuts and austerity. However it has stimulated discussion about the possibilities of using art as a mechanism for engagement and its contribution to public health could be in its close attention to the interplay and impact of social and economic determinants on a micro-scale.

### Conclusion

Collaborative, relational partnerships between the researchers, community organisations, community members, schools and artists have enabled the many facets of community engagement in creative, artistic processes to form, in-form, per-form and present lived experiences, culminating through The Peoples Platform in evidence that is co-produced, sensory and affective. We argue that creative arts activities which are relevant and meaningful emerge through the building of relationships that happen with a collaborative investment of time, a commitment to the making of something and an openness to exploration. It is a combination of what 'happens' (i.e. the self's experience of the present), what has gone before (the past) and what is imagined (the future)<sup>42</sup>. The purpose of imagining is in its engagement of what is possible when 'what happens' might hold us back, this in turn can reveal a freeing and confidence with which to explore issues, and how to address them, that might otherwise be difficult to articulate. This is as important in the devolved policy context in Wales, as it is for all governments seeking to connect with publics living in different places or with users of particular services.

In terms of contributing to the agenda of re-imagining public health, we argue that the use of arts-based approaches can facilitate both the production of evidence *and* genuine knowledge exchange between the public and decision makers. When attempting to improve public health, and acknowledging the importance of survey and statistical data, it is also essential to attend to the nuances of more mundane aspects of everyday life and those aspects of health and wellbeing that are most intangible and difficult to express. Arts-based approaches are not free from risk; as with other qualitative research methods, there are risks associated with over-disclosure and emotional distress, and with arts-based work participants often want to be named as the creators of their own work, which goes against

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3 what we are used to in terms of assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. However,  
4 arts-based approaches do offer an alternative form of knowledge that can be a powerful  
5 complement to the range of data available to policy makers. Used effectively, the arts – and  
6 in our example, theatre – can also enable citizens to engage in dialogue with those making  
7 decisions about their lives in a way that disrupts power relationships and creates an  
8 environment of understanding and respect.  
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