

Report of the Creative Economy and Community Regeneration Seminar held on Wednesday 2nd December 2015 at The Factory, Porth.

This seminar is one of a short series of events held by RSCW with collaborative partners, which have looked at various aspects of the creative economy and creative industries in South Wales. The creative economy is increasingly important to the processes of economic, social and environmental regeneration in Wales. This is particularly the case at the local community level, where creative industry can be a catalyst for wider community cohesion; a basis for greater engagement and confidence building through education and training; and securing access into economic activity and jobs.

The event attracted a modest attendance of just over twenty, drawn from a fairly wide range of individuals and organisations operating in different parts of the “creative sector”, but all committed to the principles of local community regeneration. The host for the event, Valleys Creative Ltd, based in The Factory in Porth (the former home of the Corona ‘pop’ factory), is a company limited by guarantee and incorporated in 2012. It is the social enterprise-trading arm of Valleys Kids that covenants profits back to the parent organisation. It has its own board of directors who are responsible for overseeing the management of all the affairs of Valleys Creative. The day-to-day management of Valleys Creative Ltd. is devolved to a senior member of Valleys Kids’ staff. It actively supports the development of a cultural hub with digital ability for the creative industries, with hot-desk, office and conference spaces, rentable art spaces, meeting rooms and venue hire for events and conferences; as well as recently opened Attic Art Gallery with a functioning art studio.

The event commenced with guided tour of The Factory building, attended by the majority of delegates. Before being purchased by Valley Kids in 2011, the building had been in temporary use and vacant for lengthy periods of time. Consequently it had deteriorated and required a programme of repair and restoration, which commenced on purchase. More work needs to be done, but delegates were impressed by the conversion works already undertaken and those that are still proposed. More information about the building can be found at <http://valleyskids.org/the-factory/>

The seminar opened with a short presentation by Elise Stewart, Business Development Manager of Valleys Creative Ltd. She gave a brief outline of the history of Valley Kids, which was established in 1977 as the Penygraig Basement Project and its successor the Penygraig Community Project. Over the past it has expanded to operate from seven premises. In relation to The Factory building, further conversion works are propose, which will increase the scope of Valleys Creatives Ltd. to provide confidence building, training and work experience opportunities for young people; and to establish a community hub embracing a wider range of facilities

A presentation was then given by Barbara Castle, former Director of Community Investment and Involvement at Bron Afon Community Housing and one of the most experienced community regeneration practitioners in Wales. She outlined four main issues:

- The need for cheap and small operating spaces in the localities where people feel they belong. Nothing fancy is needed – sharing an old garage or redundant shop may be less difficult to obtain/ retain than new and expensive premises, and less threatening to those starting out.
- Time and support, ideally from people on the spot, to encourage people to take the step into independent creative work, exactly as at the Factory.
- Initial subsidy, such as from low rent and cheap premises or shared facilities or equipment, so that people can take small steps into becoming financially viable, with an emphasis on the sector ‘washing its face’ rather than remaining financially dependent.
- Support in the form of networks of people at different levels of experience and success, so that people can learn from peers and not feel isolated or discouraged.

Following Barbara’s presentation short contributions were given on behalf of Time Banking Wales, based in Tredegar www.timebankingwales.org.uk/ . The organisation works at the community level to create indigenous social and economic activity, with an objective of turning voluntary and social enterprise into viable activity. One such example within Time Banking Wales Centre in Tredegar is the Ch@t Call Centre, a modestly sized centre for gaining experience and training in call centre skills. Tony Hughes, the Manager outlined the training and job opportunities that are provided close to the homes of young people in Tredegar. In giving communication and technical skills young people it has resulted in paid employment for those passing through the training programme. Katrina, one of the young people who have been through the training and work experience of Ch@t, exemplified the personal transformation that can be achieved, particularly in the communication skills that can be acquired. She now possesses good Call Centre experience and is moving on to learn broader skills.

There followed a presentation by representatives of, and young participants in, the Go Girls Project. This is a partnership project between Bron Afon Community Housing and Charter Housing aimed at increasing the self-esteem of young women aged between 15 to 25. It began by using art activities to encourage self-awareness and self-confidence and then widened activities to participants to develop self-respect and believe in themselves and their abilities. Through issue-based workshops, and monthly support meetings, Go Girls raises awareness, helps to empower young women and build their resilience. The final stage of this experience is action to make a difference for other people through campaigning, charity work and peer led learning. This includes developing an awareness of global issues affecting women and children, and has included assistance in the operation of an all women run orphanage in Belarus. This project operates in Torfaen into Caerphilly and Newport.

There then followed a discussion between delegates and presenters. It was felt that the provision of support infrastructure was a necessity, particularly in those areas where the objectives were to create confidence among young people; and the provision of relevant skills development that went beyond formal methods of education. It is only through such measures that enthusiasm and positive belief in the future can be built.

Mark Hooper, founder of Indycube, which is a provider of co-working space throughout Wales, raised three issues: Firstly not all initiatives in the creative economy should necessarily be funded by the public sector; and should certainly not be continuously grant dependent. Secondly, activities the creative economy must seek to achieve viability, if they are to be sustained and if local economies are to develop and prosper for the benefit of local communities. And thirdly, from his experience with Indycube over the past six years, creativity emerges from collaboration and sharing knowledge, which the operation of co-working space encourages and promotes. See <http://indycube.cymru/location>

There was some discussion about the role of the performing arts within the creative industry sector. It was felt that Wales had a reasonable record in these activities, with music and theatre having a good Welsh representation both nationally and internationally. There was some regret expressed that there had been a move to greater middle class dominance of this sector in the U.K. in recent years. The wide range of performing arts was seen to be both a real source of confidence building among young people as well as a potential source of employment and income for some in the future.

In the context of the creative and the cultural sectors, Anne Hayes referred to the various networks that have existed (e.g. Cultural Enterprise Services 1995 – 2007); or do exist (e.g.'s Made in the Valleys <http://madeinthevalleys.com/> ; the Young Promoters Network; Arts Development UK <http://artsdevelopmentuk.org/> ; What Next www.whatnextculture.co.uk/ – with branches in the Valleys and Cardiff)

Margaret and Richard Jervis related the discussion to their Valley Kids experience. In many respects formal education identified losers as well as winners, and loss of confidence could occur particularly at a stage when education became increasingly competitive. But young people could be both challenging and could often benefit from being challenged. By providing them with opportunities to respond, previously unrecognised talent could emerge; but more formal education, based on targets and learning thresholds, rarely deals with such circumstances.

So, some conclusions were suggested as to how the creative sector and activities can contribute to successful community regeneration.

- For young people certain activities within the sector (art, craft, music, acting etc) can give confidence, which has sometimes been destroyed through formal education and social background issues. This situation of lack of confidence might also apply to older age groups.
- It can enable new skills relating to technical and digital knowledge to be disseminated to all age groups; and encourage young people, in particular, to develop these skills for potential income earning.
- It can encourage initiative that can provide a basis for training and paid work within local and regional economies.

This debate could continue among practitioners through the exchange of practice and networking and this will be addressed as one of the outcomes of the informal seminar. Particular thanks are given to the staff of Valley Kids and Valley Creatives for hosting the event.

*Richard Essex
RSCW Co-ordinator
December 2015.*