



# **From Voluntary Arts to Creative Lives**

*30 years championing  
creative activity for all*



VOLUNTARY **ARTS** NETWORK



**Voluntary Arts**



**Creative  
Lives**

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# **I**ntroduction

**Over the last 30 years Voluntary Arts has supported, celebrated and advocated for amateur creative participation, significantly impacting the academic, political, social and cultural landscape.**

Since our establishment in 1991, we have seen huge policy shifts across the UK and Ireland, which increasingly embrace the contribution of everyday creativity and the role of amateur, community and grassroots arts and creativity. This change has been driven by a rise in academic research demonstrating the impact of arts and creativity on health and wellbeing, as well as reducing isolation and community cohesion. We have also seen a rise in creative organisations striving for equality across the arts and cultural sector, which no doubt derives from the long and successful history of community arts in the UK, born in the 1970s.

Voluntary Arts has been instrumental in this transformation through its campaigning, lobbying, research and innovative creative activity – always working collaboratively to champion active participation in arts, culture and creativity.



Through testimonials, key events and reports this document picks out 30 pivotal moments, which demonstrate the vital role Voluntary Arts has played over the last 30 years. It is by no means a definitive history of the organisation, rather a series of snapshots to provide a flavour of our work and our achievements. This document will provide an anchor to our past successes, enabling us to confidently build on our legacy and evolve as an organisation and respond to the current context and challenges ahead.

Over the last 30 years and specifically the last decade we've seen a rise in public interest in everyday making and creativity, illustrated by the growth of television programmes and online activities which showcase and celebrate amateur participation across different art forms.

Whereas cooking, interior design and gardening have been regular fixtures on television and radio for years, the two decades since the turn of the millennium have seen programmes such as The Great British Sewing Bee, The Great Pottery Throw Down, Portrait Artist of the Year and Landscape Artist of the Year attract large viewing figures, inspiring people across the nations to try their hand at creative activity.

We've also seen a rise in 'do it yourself' creative products and activities linked to the so called wellbeing economy and in 2020 Hobbycraft launched its first ever Christmas advert on video on demand services. This public interest is concurrent with a rise in internet platforms democratising access to culture and creative activity, enabling people to participate in cultural activity wherever they are, through platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok.

Alongside this movement, Voluntary Arts has spearheaded the Get Creative campaign, in partnership with the BBC, Arts Council England, Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Arts Council of Wales, Crafts Council, Creative Scotland, Libraries Connected, Local Government Association, Scottish Libraries & Information Council and What Next? Over the past six years, Get Creative has featured thousands of events across the UK, providing creative opportunities for hundreds of thousands of participants and reaching many millions through broadcast coverage and online.

Today Voluntary Arts has 20 staff and more than 60 volunteers working across all five nations of the UK and Ireland. We know that creative expression in all its forms is a fundamental part of being human, but that individuals and communities need opportunities and support for creativity to flourish. We also know that people coming together to create, have fun, share experiences and support each other can have a positive impact on both their physical and emotional wellbeing.

In June 2021, Voluntary Arts celebrated its 30th anniversary. We used this milestone to change our name to Creative Lives to reflect the evolution of our work and our vision for the future. Creative Lives expresses our role as a voice for positive change, working to improve opportunities for everyone to be creative as part of their everyday lives. We will continue to do this through a collaborative approach, working with communities and partners to achieve sustainable change at a local and national level.

As we emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic, which has brought into sharp focus the role of creativity for personal and community resilience as well as economic and cultural progression, we aim to support, champion and celebrate creative lives for all.







**O**ur

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# 90s



VOLUNTARY **ARTS** NETWORK

# 1991

## Founding the Voluntary Arts Network

In 1988, the Carnegie UK Trust convened a conference in Edinburgh at which it was agreed that those involved in the amateur arts needed an effective voice, but one that did not exacerbate distinctions between amateur and professional.

A working party took the discussions forward and at a meeting in York in 1991 (also sponsored by Carnegie) it was agreed to formally constitute a Voluntary Arts Network as a body able to represent the interests of all involved in amateur arts. Its role was to support existing organisations and act as an advocate for development. In March 1992, Voluntary Arts Network was registered in Scotland as an independent charitable company.

### Sarah Davidson, Chief Executive, Carnegie UK Trust



*In the late 1980s a number of amateur arts organisations began to voice the need for a central network to represent and support arts organisations across the UK and Ireland. The Carnegie UK Trust, whose mission is to improve wellbeing, played a key role in the early discussions and convened a conference in Edinburgh in 1988 which affirmed the need for a more effective voice for the amateur arts.*

*Following the establishment of the Voluntary Arts Network as an independent charity in 1992, the Trust continued to support it with grant funding over the following decade.*

# 1995

## Voluntary Arts Briefings

Since 1995, Voluntary Arts Briefings have provided essential guidance and advice in handy resources written in plain English and covering all aspects of running a voluntary arts group, including: Getting Started; Get Funded; Planning Events; Publicity & Promotion; Best Practice; and Roles & Responsibilities. Voluntary Arts has published over 140 briefings and they continue to be widely used today.



**Carole Williams, National Drama  
Advisor, Scottish Community  
Drama Association (SCDA)**

*Voluntary Arts has supported SCDA in providing a range of services to our members. In addition to its excellent jargon-free briefings, it has always been responsive to requests for support in navigating funding or partnership working.*

*This also furnished an opportunity for one of our member clubs to win an Epic Award. Voluntary Arts has also provided a platform for community groups across artforms to come together to discuss common challenges and share successes.*

# 1998

## **Voluntary Arts introduces a devolved structure**

From 1998, Voluntary Arts has pioneered a devolved organisational structure as a response to UK political devolution. Having separate staff teams based in each of the UK nations with a local office and sub-brand (eg 'Voluntary Arts Wales') has enabled Voluntary Arts to maximize its influence and connections with devolved governments and arts councils while retaining the benefits of being a single UK and Ireland-wide organisation.

Voluntary Arts has always been a single company and charity with one Board of Trustees and one set of accounts, but the devolved structure has enabled us to respond to nation-specific policy. Most UK-wide organisations tend to be based in London or the South East and do very little outside England. Voluntary Arts developed the other way round (with Voluntary Arts England being the last team to be established) and has much stronger connections in Cardiff, Edinburgh and Belfast than most comparable organisations. This has put us in a unique position to explore the most effective way to run a truly devolved organisation in a post-devolution United Kingdom.

In 2005, Voluntary Arts instigated a major organisational governance review to strengthen the internal framework for its devolved structure. This review led to the development of the Voluntary Arts Governance Handbook - a creative adaptation of the Charity Governance Code. Our work in this area was recognised by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) when Voluntary Arts was later awarded the 2012 Winifred Tumim Memorial Prize for Best Practice in Charity Governance.



# 2000s



# 2004

## **Valuing Voluntary Arts: The State of the Sector**

In the first detailed research of its kind, Voluntary Arts - in partnership with Dorset County Council and Somerset County Council - surveyed the voluntary arts sector in Dorset and Somerset in 2004. Nearly 1,000 voluntary arts organisations were identified in the two counties, with more than 50,000 members and a total annual turnover of at least £6.6 million. There were at least 1 million participant attendances at voluntary arts group sessions per annum and annual audiences of 1.65 million at voluntary arts events.

The research concluded that the lack of venues for voluntary arts activity was a serious problem and capacity building for the sector was urgently needed. It also found a considerable participation deficit among those not in work, including unemployed people and those looking after the home/family. Most of the findings from 'Valuing the Voluntary Arts' would be echoed in 'Our Creative Talent' - the first comprehensive national study of the voluntary and amateur arts in England - in 2008.



## 2008

### **Lobbying on the diversion of National Lottery funding to the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games**

In January 2008, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport announced in the House of Commons that, in response to lobbying from the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, Heritage Link, the National Campaign For The Arts and Voluntary Arts, there would be no further diversion from lottery good causes to fund the Olympics.

This joint lobbying campaign achieved amazing press coverage, featuring on the front page of The Guardian in April 2007. This led to mentions in The Telegraph, Daily Mail, Sky News website, The Stage and Third Sector. This coverage prompted a House of Lords debate on 'Lottery funds and the 2012 Olympic Games' in May 2007, followed by a House of Commons debate on the 'impact on arts and heritage of the diversion of lottery funding to the 2012 London Olympic Games' which took place in June 2007.

The UK Government announcement in January 2008 represented a significant step forward in terms of the Government listening to the voluntary arts, sports and heritage sectors.





**Pete Moorey, Head of Campaigns  
and UK Advocacy, Christian Aid**

*The London Olympics in 2012 were an exciting prospect – and came with a big price tag. So big, that the Government decided in 2007 to divert more Lottery funding intended for the arts, as well as charities, sport and heritage to the Games.*

*As a campaigner at the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, I teamed up with Voluntary Arts, the Central Council for Physical Recreation and Heritage Link to kick up a fuss in the media and Parliament. Working together, we got debates in the House of Commons and Lords, made the front page of the Guardian, and ultimately secured a commitment to return this cash from the Government.*

*It was a great campaign and all the more impactful for Voluntary Arts' important role.*



# 2008

## **Seminal report ‘Our Creative Talent’ published**

In June 2008, ‘Our Creative Talent: building local voluntary and amateur arts participation’ – a joint conference organised by Voluntary Arts, Arts Council England and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport – attracted delegates from voluntary arts umbrella bodies, several government departments, local authorities, voluntary sector agencies and funders from across the UK. The main focus for the conference was to launch the report ‘Our Creative Talent: the voluntary and amateur arts in England’ – the results of research commissioned by DCMS and ACE and undertaken by the consultants TBR.

Culture Minister Margaret Hodge opened the conference in June 2008 by revealing the headline statistics from the report that there are 49,140 voluntary arts groups in England and between them they have a total membership of 5.9 million and an additional 3.5 million people volunteer as extras or helpers – a total of 9.4 million people taking part.

The Minister said “I hope and believe that this conference marks a significant change in the way we think about the arts and what we call ‘the arts sector’” She called the research “a significant new landmark in our understanding of how and why people participate in the arts” and said “we have been paying too little attention to such an important part of the arts ecology”. Margaret Hodge also said “I firmly believe that the health of our arts depends on both the professional and the voluntary sector – the two are closely and directly dependent on one another.”

Alan Davey, Chief Executive of Arts Council England said: “From an Arts Council perspective the voluntary arts isn’t a footnote or appendix to the arts in England today: it is part of the core script.” (June 2008)





**Mark Robinson,  
Thinking Practice**

*Voluntary Arts has been massively influential, not just in supporting people to come together and create in communities, but in fundamentally altering how policy-makers, funders and arts professionals consider the creativity of those for whom it is everyday life more than livelihood.*

*It has had to challenge, support and inspire to achieve that and to connect creative lives right across the UK and Ireland. That ‘our creative talent’ – the title of the conference I chaired for Voluntary Arts in 2008 – now sits centrally in so many responses to the pandemic is in part due to your 30 years of hard work.*

## 2008

### **AMATEO - the European Network for Active Participation in Cultural Activities**

In June 2008, Voluntary Arts took part in a conference in Ljubljana, Slovenia, where the constitution was agreed for a 'European network for active participation in cultural activities' to be known as AMATEO. Voluntary Arts was the sole UK representative amongst the six founding members of 'Amateo', having organised the 'Value – Include – Connect' Conference in Cardiff in 2005 which led to the development of the new European network.

#### **Villy Dall, President of AMATEO 2008-11 and President of AKKS since 2003**



*Voluntary Arts was very instrumental in creating AMATEO – The European Network for Active Participation in Cultural Activities. At the very first European meeting, called 'art4all', held in Utrecht, the Netherlands, during 10-12 September 2004 and organized by the Dutch Platform for Amateur Arts and the Dutch Foundation for Amateur and Stage Arts, Voluntary Arts kindly offered to host the next meeting. The conference 'Value – Include – Connect' with the subtitle 'The role of the voluntary arts in Europe' was held in Cardiff in November 2005, organised by Voluntary Arts.*

*Follow-up talks concluded that – in order to continue the good work and achieve more influence and grants for amateur arts in the European Union (EU) – we needed to create some kind of officially registered organization. Eventually, AMATEO was then created in Ljubljana on 21 June 2008 and in October officially registered in Ghent as an international organization under Belgian law.*

## 2009

### Up for Arts - a dynamic partnership between Voluntary Arts and BBC Local Radio stations

Up for Arts, a Voluntary Arts initiative, began in 2009 in partnership with BBC Radio Merseyside as a legacy project following Liverpool's year as European Capital of Culture 2008. Up for Arts seeks to shine a spotlight on creativity through radio broadcasting in partnership with local BBC Radio stations. It produces innovative events, programming and campaigns, which celebrate local creativity and inspire people to get involved who may not think creativity is for them.

Successful projects have seen Voluntary Arts support the 70th anniversary of the Windrush migration, with a high profile event at City Hall in 2018, in partnership with BBC Radio London. Up for Arts has also played a key role in bringing local creative activity to people's homes via the airwaves throughout lockdown restrictions brought about by the 2020 Covid pandemic. Research published in 2020 found that: 'People electing to take part in Up for Arts projects between April 2018 and March 2020 experienced an enhanced sense of wellbeing'.

Up for Arts is currently established at five local radio stations as well as BBC Radio Wales and BBC Radio Cymru and it will continue to promote Creative Lives. on air as we build new partnerships with local stations in 2021 and beyond.



**Andrew Bowman,**  
**Editor,**  
**BBC Radio Merseyside**

*The power of the Up for Arts partnership with the BBC drives creative innovation. Over the years, Up for Arts has created a successful mechanism to spotlight local creativity – we then use our airwaves to promote activities and attract an audience.*

*By being in people's homes, radio connects all sorts of groups that are usually considered difficult to reach. The partnership has enabled us to support the community in new ways, bringing creative ideas and activities to those who need it most. We are delighted to have worked with Voluntary Arts since 2008 and look forward to developing new initiatives with Creative Lives.*

# 2009

## Open Stages

In September 2008, Royal Shakespeare Company Artistic Director Michael Boyd gave an interview to *The Stage* in which he spoke about his desire to use the 2012 World Shakespeare Festival to break down barriers between amateur and professional theatre. Over the next two years Voluntary Arts worked with the RSC to develop the Open Stages programme which saw the RSC and regional theatres across the UK collaborating with hundreds of amateur theatre groups. Open Stages became a model of best practice in how the professional and amateur arts can support each other and provided a valuable platform for recognising the excellence that exists within amateur theatre and raising its profile.

### Geraldine Collinge, Director of Creative Placemaking and Public Programmes,



*In 2009, the Royal Shakespeare Company had an idea to explore a large-scale collaboration with amateur theatre makers. We worked closely with Voluntary Arts to access key stakeholders including umbrella and representative organisations and amateur theatre makers themselves.*

*Voluntary Arts helped us to shape the Open Stages project which ran successfully for six years and really helped to change the relationship between amateur and professional theatre makers, the legacy of which is in the way we all make work.*







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10<sub>s</sub>



**Voluntary Arts**

# 2010

## Epic Awards

Launched in 2010, the Epic Awards shine a spotlight on the achievements of creative groups across the UK and Ireland. Each year, shortlisted entries are put forward for the highly coveted People's Choice Award while winners and runners-up from each of the four main categories (England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales) are selected by our panel of judges. The Epic Awards are an annual opportunity for groups or projects to be recognised for the incredible work that takes place in the voluntary, amateur and community-based creative sector.

### **Guy O'Donnell, Get the Chance - Epic Awards, Celebrating Diversity Award recipient, 2017**

*"Get the Chance was honoured to be selected as Runner-up in the Celebrating Diversity Award. We strive to reflect the diverse nature of society in our voluntary membership. We learn from our team about barriers to sport and cultural provision and seek to work together to provide responses which are representative of all citizens in the UK."*

### **Rachel Parry, Goldies Cymru - Epic Awards Wales winners, 2017**

*"Winning the Epic Award was a wonderful occasion. Hearing about the other incredible organisations out there doing fantastic work in all sectors was humbling. It was such a proud moment for the charity to receive this award and to be recognised for the hard work that everyone does."*

### **Sarah Goodey & Kate Mercer, Art on the Hill Newport - Epic Awards Wales winners, 2020**

*"We enable participants to celebrate who they are, to promote themselves and their resources in our community, without prerequisite or agenda, other than to champion the cultural profile of Newport. It was a wonderful surprise to win the Epic Award, and the team felt very boosted by this, the generous award and support in-kind. All of the projects nominated have community and togetherness at their core, and it means more to be alongside such amazing projects across the UK. We all learnt a lot very quickly and hopefully made some new friends and potential partners."*

# 2011

## Voluntary Arts supports the European Year of Volunteering

Voluntary Arts sat on the Cabinet Office European Year of Volunteering 2011 Working Group, helping to plan activities in the UK as part of this EU-wide celebration of volunteering.



**John Knights,**  
**Senior Portfolio Manager UK,**  
**The National Lottery**  
**Community Fund**

*I often worked with Voluntary Arts during my time working on volunteering in the Office for Civil Society at the Cabinet Office in the early 2010s. Voluntary Arts was one of my few “go to” organisations when developing new programmes and policy ideas due to their creative, honest and thoughtful advice.*

*I really enjoyed working with the organisation, particularly during the 2011 European Year of Volunteering, in which Voluntary Arts played a crucial role in raising the profile of voluntary arts and added a much needed artistic touch to the year’s programme of activity.*

## 2011

### Measuring the impact of grassroots arts activities

In 2011, Voluntary Arts worked with the Universities of Birmingham, Exeter and Glamorgan on a research project, supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council: Connected Communities Funding, to look at the role of grassroots arts activities in communities.

This scoping study identified a range of impacts and outcomes from the activities of amateur arts groups, including: improved mental health and wellbeing; improvements in educational attainment; and the economic role such activities play in communities. The measurement of the impact of amateur arts was explored further with members of grass-roots arts networks at a day conference in October 2011 at Cecil Sharp House in London. The project produced a Third Sector Research Centre Working Paper, published in December 2011.

**Angus McCabe, Senior Research Fellow, Third Sector Research Centre, University of Birmingham**



*Voluntary and community arts have been under-researched in the academic literature. Between 2010 and 2018, Voluntary Arts worked in collaboration with the Third Sector Research Centre at the University of Birmingham to build a wider, and deeper, understanding of the role the arts play in community life.*

*This included convening and providing expert panel evidence for the Arts and Humanities Research Council, producing a scoping paper on the arts role in connecting communities and a book chapter (published by Policy Press; 2018) on understanding community arts organisations and practices. These all reinforced a key message that community arts are integral to community wellbeing.*

## 2012

### London 2012 Cultural Olympiad

Between 2010 and 2012, the Voluntary Arts Once in a Lifetime Cultural Olympiad project (in partnership with Making Music) helped voluntary arts groups to get involved with the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad, the Torch Relay programme and the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Opening and Closing Ceremonies.

#### **Helen Thomas, Voluntary Arts and Making Music Once in Lifetime Officer, 2010-2012**

*Marilyn Lovett of the Quilters' Guild of the British Isles wanted to be able to say to her grandchildren "I took part in the London Olympics - not by running a marathon, but through sewing a quilt or a pennant". Marilyn certainly did take part: quilters made a staggering 14,000 commemorative pennants for participating athletes and 500 quilts, one for each nation. They were awarded the London 2012 Inspire Mark for their efforts.*



*Other voluntary groups also stretched themselves to achieve the Inspire Mark, thanks in part to support from Voluntary Arts. Recognising the unique opportunities presented by the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad, Voluntary Arts worked in partnership with Making Music to encourage groups to get involved. This resulted in fantastic collaborations between amateurs and professionals in major projects including the Royal Shakespeare Company's World Shakespeare Festival and the BBC-led Music Nation. Samba groups, choirs, orchestras and dancers animated the route of the Torch Relay.*

*And the Olympic Closing Ceremony featured two morris dance sides, a bhangra dance group, a pipe band and a male voice choir. Those who took part helped to showcase the wealth of creativity in the voluntary arts on a national and international platform, and, like Marilyn, will have inspiring stories to tell their grandchildren.*



## 2012

### **Luminate: Scotland's creative ageing organisation**

Voluntary Arts was a founder member of the Strategy Group that developed the Luminate Festival - a partnership between Creative Scotland, the Baring Foundation and Age Scotland - and helped to establish Luminate as a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation. Luminate ran nationwide creative ageing festivals from 2012, with programmes featuring new work, collaborations and international projects specially planned and programmed for the festival, as well as independently-run projects led by a wide range of cultural and community organisations. In 2018 Luminate moved to a year-round programme developing creative activities with, by and for older people.



**Iain Munro,**  
**Chief Executive,**  
**Creative Scotland**

*Everyone is creative. That's our belief at Creative Scotland, and one that is clearly shared with Voluntary Arts. Our longstanding partnership has taken many forms, from advice and guidance, to training, funding, the Get Creative initiative, the Epic Awards, and helping to establish other nationally significant developments like Luminate, Scotland's national creative ageing organisation.*

*This work has helped ensure that everyday creativity has been increasingly recognised and valued as central to people's lives, bringing joy and meaning and fulfilment across the communities of Scotland. We look forward to the next 30 years of equally productive and significant work with Creative Lives.*

# 15.

## 2013

### **Arts Council England Rural Stakeholders Group**

In 2013, Voluntary Arts helped to establish a new Arts Council England Rural Stakeholders group - a gathering of cultural organisations with a particular interest in rural affairs. The group meets regularly to review data and evidence relating to arts and culture and rural communities and to consider the economic impacts of arts and culture at a local level.

#### **Paul Bristow, Director, Strategic Partnerships, Arts Council England**



*Voluntary Arts has been a hugely valuable partner for Arts Council England as we have developed our approach to working in rural areas. In 2013, we set up a Rural Stakeholders Group to help inform our thinking and to ensure that we could hear from a wide range of voices.*

*Voluntary Arts was there from the start, challenging us when necessary but always being constructive and with positive ideas for change. You really helped us shift our thinking and brought fresh perspectives and insights.*

# 16.

## 2014

### **Our Cultural Commons**

In October 2014, Voluntary Arts and Arts Development UK jointly launched 'Our Cultural Commons' - a major new initiative to provide a space for discussion of potential solutions to the problems facing local cultural infrastructure and the debate on the nature of the cultural commons that we aspire to in the future.

Consultative meetings were held in Edinburgh, Cardiff, Belfast, London and Dublin, involving national leaders from the arts and culture, voluntary sector, adult education, healthcare and more. From these meetings, together with research commissioned by Voluntary Arts, a series of policy demands were identified to encourage and support more innovative, cost-effective, local, collaborative practice to sustain and develop local cultural infrastructure in communities across the country.

Between November 2017 and April 2018, we published a weekly series of articles on the subject of 'Our Cultural Commons', curated by Voluntary Arts and authored by cultural thinkers and doers. The series helped make visible the cultural commons in action, in order to encourage new approaches to sustaining creative cultural activity in local places. 'Making Common Cause' - our collection of articles responding to Our Cultural Commons from diverse perspectives - was published in November 2018. The book was launched at Cecil Sharp House in London with a panel discussion about the key themes of the book. The recording of this discussion formed the first episode of the Making Common Cause podcast with four further episodes following in November and December 2018.

17.

2014

### **Creative Citizens Programme**

The 'Creative Citizens Programme' was a partnership between Voluntary Arts and Mid and East Antrim Borough Council. 'Creative Citizens' was an action research project that brought local people together with local and regional organisations, services and networks through active engagement in a programme of 150 arts and culture-related events and activities. It was part of 'Our Cultural Commons', the campaign run by Voluntary Arts and Arts Development UK to explore methods for creating a local infrastructure that sustains the creative and cultural lives of local communities, based on what assets exist rather than those that have been lost.

**Rosalind Lowry, Arts Development Officer, Mid and East Antrim Borough Council & Management of The Braid Arts Centre**



*The Arts Service of Mid and East Antrim Borough Council has had a long and celebrated partnership with Voluntary Arts, in particular with the award-winning Creative Citizens Programme and the success of our local arts community in the Epic Awards. We congratulate you for your wonderful 30th anniversary and look forward to future collaborations with Creative Lives.*

18.

2015

**Get Creative**

In autumn 2014, Voluntary Arts was one of four organisations invited to manage the national Get Creative campaign with BBC Arts. For the Get Creative launch event at Conway Hall in London on 19 February 2015, Voluntary Arts organised a range of creative activities led by amateur artists. Meanwhile, across the UK Voluntary Arts staff were involved in running 11 of the other 14 Get Creative launch events. Since 2015, Voluntary Arts has played a significant role in Get Creative, chairing the Get Creative Steering Group, employing the Get Creative Project Manager, providing content for broadcast and for the Get Creative website, and managing the annual Get Creative Festival.

**Jonty Claypole, Director of Arts, BBC**

*Voluntary Arts has been central to both the founding and on-going delivery of the Get Creative campaign and festival. With a truly pan-UK infrastructure, it is the perfect partner for organisations like the BBC to work with in both reflecting and stimulating the nation's creativity.*



## 2015

### **Influencing legislation**

Between 2012 and 2015, Voluntary Arts worked with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to influence UK Government measures to deregulate entertainment licensing for small, community events. The resulting Legislative Reform (Entertainment Licensing) Order 2014, deregulating plays and dance to audiences of up to 500 people, came into effect on 6 April 2015.

## 20.

## 2016

### **Arts and Humanities Research Council Cultural Value Project**

On Thursday 17 March 2016, the Arts and Humanities Research Council published 'Understanding the value of arts and culture' by Professor Geoffrey Crossick and Dr Patrycja Kaszynska – the final report of the AHRC's three-year Cultural Value Project. The report looks at how we think about the value of the arts and culture to individuals and society, and the methodologies we can use for capturing cultural value. The Project broadened the scope of the discussion on cultural value to include, alongside the subsidised cultural and commercial sectors, amateur and participatory arts and culture, which are how most people engage.

The report also emphasised the way they are part of a single ecology. Voluntary Arts was a member of the Cultural Value Project Advisory Group and had significant influence on the project's focus on the wider cultural ecology.





**Professor  
Geoffrey Crossick**

*Grassroots arts practice is on the agenda of those wanting to shape arts policy and understand the impact of the arts in Britain today. Various political and cultural forces lie behind its new prominence, but without effective actors such change rarely happens.*

*Voluntary Arts has been the key actor in this process. As Director of the AHRC's Cultural Value Project I saw grassroots arts as a key component of our work, and Voluntary Arts' involvement enabled us to grasp its complex character.*

*Voluntary Arts has been the driving force behind everyday participation's centrality to agendas for policy makers, researchers and funders alike. This is not just because of its representative role but through the excellent research that underpins its advocacy.*



# 2016

## Exit 15

The Exit 15 Project, based in Ballyogan, was a partnership between Voluntary Arts and Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council. The project aimed to increase public engagement in the arts in Ballyogan using a ground up approach. Exit 15 was a high quality collaborative 18 month artistic programme responding to the creative aspirations of local people led by the needs and interests of the community. It was coupled with an action research project led by Queen's University Belfast in tandem with two other local authorities exploring similar approaches to cultural engagement (Mid & East Antrim Borough Council and Belfast City Council).

**Máire Davey, Assistant Arts Officer Participation & Learning,  
Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown Arts Office, Dublin, Ireland**



*I had the pleasure of working with Voluntary Arts on a Creative Place programme called EXIT 15 from 2016-20. Voluntary Arts is one of the most important organisations working with and on behalf of communities that engage with 'everyday' creativity in Ireland and the UK today.*

*The partnership with Voluntary Arts aided our Arts Office to not only successfully deliver this programme with local people for local people, but also to learn from and reflect on the experience and trial new ways of working. The approach was asset-based and the work continued even in Covid times, through the relationships fostered and the people centred perspective undertaken.*

## 2016

### **Open Conversations: Developing strong, effective connections to Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities**

The Open Conversations report tells the story of the Voluntary Arts BAME Advisory Panel, which was initiated to help put the organisation on a path to greater diversity in all aspects of its work. The Panel's brief was confined to a twelve month period (July 2015 - July 2016) and the publication of the resulting report was very clearly recognised as a step forward for the organisation but also, more importantly, as the beginning of a significant process of change.

The Panel met regularly and interviews were conducted with those involved with BAME creative communities across the UK. These conversations raised important issues and questions for Voluntary Arts and the wider cultural community. In the report, the panel describe their approach of identifying missing links, opening conversations, listening and moving from inaction to initiating a process of improvement. In May 2017, Voluntary Arts was announced as winner of the Board Diversity & Inclusion category at the Charity Governance Awards 2017. This award recognised the work undertaken by Voluntary Arts to make positive strides in improving diversity and inclusion within the organisation at board level and in its relationships with creative groups across the UK and Ireland.



**Jeanette Bain-Burnett**

*Huge congratulations to Voluntary Arts on 30 years of cultivating participation in the UK's cultural and creative life. In 2015, I worked with Voluntary Arts as a strategic consultant to explore how the organisation and its networks could strengthen connections with Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities through a policy research paper called Dynamic and Diverse. I was struck by Voluntary Arts' approach to leading change - it started at governance level; included new voices; and was more than just a talking shop.*

*The ideas and recommendations we co-developed led to tangible next steps through the Open Conversations report and saw the organisation embrace more diverse leaders and collaborators. I'm excited to celebrate 30 years of success with Voluntary Arts and look forward to an exciting, inclusive future for Creative Lives.*

# 2017

## Towards Cultural Democracy

In June 2017, the Get Creative Research Project, established to evaluate the impact of the Get Creative campaign, published its final report, 'Towards Cultural Democracy: promoting cultural capabilities for everyone', written by Nick Wilson, Jonathan Gross and Anna Bull. 'Towards Cultural Democracy' used the learning from the Get Creative campaign to call for a radical but pragmatic new approach to understanding and enabling cultural opportunity. It argued that cultural opportunities are comprised of a far broader range of freedoms than access to already existing publicly funded arts – the primary focus of current cultural policy. The report stressed that everyone has cultural capability – by ensuring there are more cultural opportunities for people to realise their own creative potential it would be possible to move towards cultural democracy: “an achievable future in which the substantive freedom to co-create versions of culture is enjoyed by all”.

**Baroness Deborah Bull, Vice President & Vice-Principal (London),  
King's College London**



*Voluntary Arts provides an inspiring example of the power inherent in the collective, demonstrating how a single organisation can effectively represent multiple voices across a vastly wide ranging sector and so help to drive change. Voluntary Arts has played a key role in connecting effectively between the lived experience of millions of people and the academic research community in partnerships like BBC Get Creative, the Warwick Commission and the AHRC Cultural Value Project.*

*The policy changes we are now beginning to see, which recognise the importance of participatory art and everyday creativity and their contribution to the broader cultural ecology, is testament to the impact of Voluntary Arts over its initial three decades and the difference it has made to so many creative lives.*

### Amateur Theatre Research

Voluntary Arts was part of the steering group for two research projects led by Royal Holloway University of London, University of Warwick and University of Exeter: 'Amateur Dramatics: Crafting Communities in Time and Space' and 'For love or money? Collaboration between Amateur and Professional Theatre' (which focused on the Royal Shakespeare Company's Open Stages programme, developed in partnership with Voluntary Arts).

*Researching the role of amateur theatre in communities with Professors Jane Milling and Nadine Holdsworth demonstrated the major contribution Voluntary Arts makes to today's cultural landscape. The benefits of participating in community arts led by professional artists has been evidenced for decades, but despite its utopian history, the significance of amateur arts has been largely overlooked.*

*The work of Voluntary Arts is refreshingly different. By illuminating the creativity of amateur enthusiasts, it provided valuable cultural recognition for forms of creative participation that have been overlooked or derided. Voluntary Arts' radical vision offers a glimpse of utopia in a dystopian world.*



**Professor Helen Nicholson,  
Royal Holloway,  
University of London**



## 2017

### **The Big Conversation**

In 2017, Voluntary Arts ran its first Big Conversation survey, seeking to undertake a detailed analysis of the estimated 60,000 voluntary-led creative groups which operate across the UK and Ireland. The survey was issued again in 2018 and 2020, enabling a comparison of changing attitudes to creative activity. In total the three surveys attracted about 2,000 responses. They have provided invaluable insight for our work, and have demonstrated the huge contribution that the voluntary and amateur creative sector makes to addressing the most pressing public policy challenges, in particular loneliness and social isolation.

One of the exceptional findings was the overwhelming positivity and resilience of the voluntary creative sector, with respondents scoring over 4 out of 5 when asked about their future prospects. Even during the pandemic in 2020, despite the dire situation there was only a small overall dent in confidence from participants and group leaders about the continuation of their creative activities.

## 2018

### **Cultural Governance Alliance**

In 2018, Voluntary Arts was a founder member of the Cultural Governance Alliance. The Alliance was intended to be a light-touch collective of agencies, organisations and advocates working strategically to champion, share and promote best practice in the governance of culture, supporting cultural organisations to be effective, resilient, and perform at their best. It is an initiative of the Clore Leadership Programme that brings together a network of agencies that are active in the support and promotion of good governance in the cultural sector – including Voluntary Arts.

## Hilary Carty, Director, Clore Leadership



*In 2017, I worked, with David Bryan and Anne Murch on an independent strategic review of governance in arts organisations and museums, commissioned by the Clore Leadership Programme and a group of key independent Trusts – the Clore Duffield Foundation, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, Foyle Foundation, Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Garfield Weston Foundation.*

*Our report ‘Achieving good governance: A challenge of our time’ recommended establishing a Governance Alliance – a strategic partnership of agencies working collectively and proactively to support cultural sector boards to develop strong leadership in the context of a changing and ambiguous world.*

*We invited Voluntary Arts to join roundtable discussions at the beginning of 2018 which led to the creation of the Cultural Governance Alliance. As a founder member of the Cultural Governance Alliance Steering Group, Voluntary Arts has played a key role in developing the Alliance and our annual Governance Now conferences.*

*Voluntary Arts has always provided incredibly helpful, clear advice and resources on governance issues and has shown itself to be a model of best practice in organisational governance, winning several national governance awards. I am delighted to wish Voluntary Arts a happy 30th birthday and look forward to continuing to work with Creative Lives to encourage good governance across the cultural sector.*

# 2018

## Culture, Health and Wellbeing Alliance

Voluntary Arts was a founder Strategic Alliance Member of the new Culture, Health and Wellbeing Alliance, which launched in April 2018 as a merger of the National Alliance for Arts, Health and Wellbeing and the National Alliance for Museums, Health and Wellbeing.

## Victoria Hume, Director, Cultural, Health & Wellbeing Alliance



*Voluntary Arts is a vitally important partner for the Culture, Health & Wellbeing Alliance. As a founding Strategic Alliance Member, Voluntary Arts helped us set a path for the organisation that embraces a wide understanding of health beyond diagnosis.*

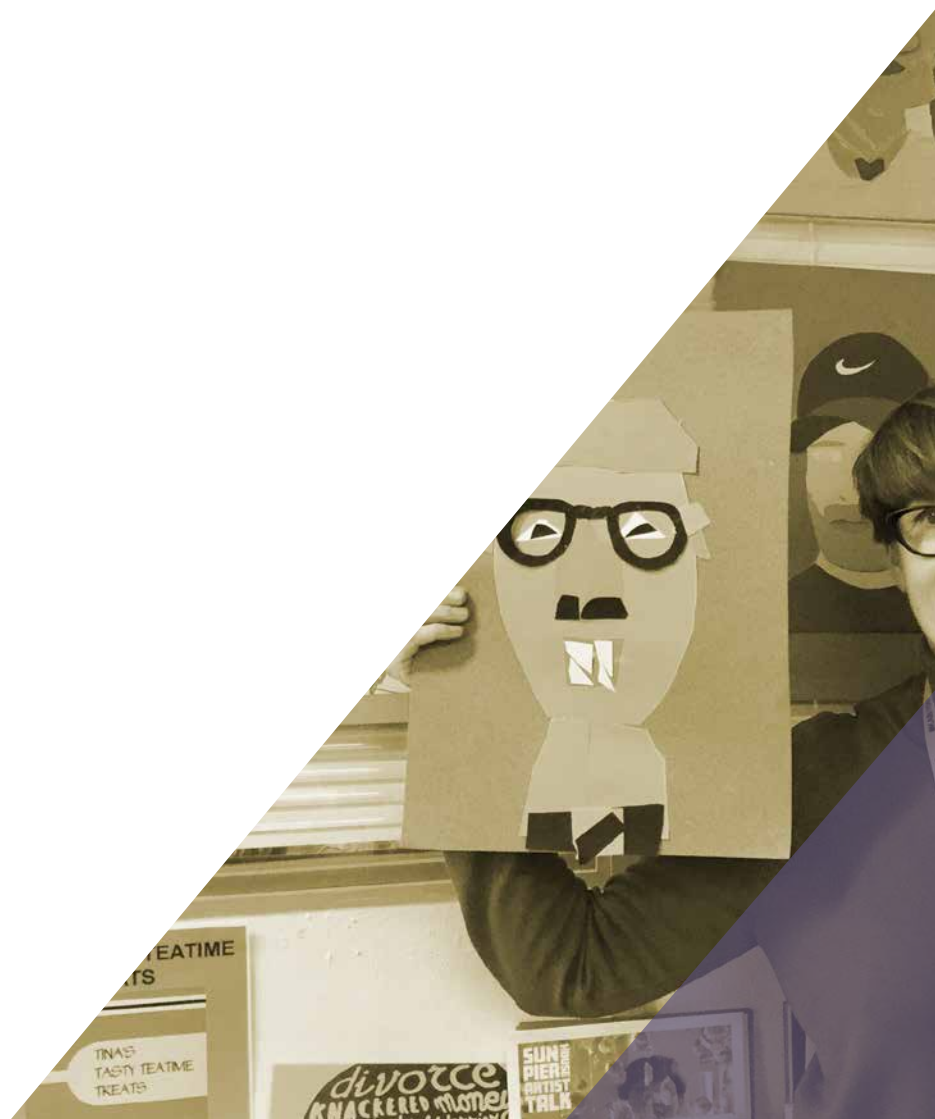
*Voluntary Arts' publications and work in relation to cultural democracy and ownership have influenced our thinking profoundly as we have grown into a substantial membership organisation over the last two years.*

*We have partnered with Get Creative to expand and amplify our respective festivals, and we have been proud to showcase Voluntary Arts' work at our own events. On a personal note, the #CreativeNetwork Zoom sessions Voluntary Arts ran during lockdown were a lifeline.*

*Voluntary Arts is helping us all - practitioners, funders and policymakers - towards a more open, realistic and sophisticated understanding of the relationship between creativity, health and the economy. We look forward to working with Creative Lives to develop a more equitable world of culture and creativity.*

20

20s



# 2020

## Let's Create

In January 2020, Arts Council England launched 'Let's Create' - its strategy for 2020-30. This new strategy demonstrated a significant shift in the attitude and language of the national funding body in relation to the amateur and voluntary arts sector, stating: "This Strategy is based on the need to recognise and celebrate the creative lives of everyone in this country, and its success will depend on our ability to understand and champion a wider range of culture than we have before, including in the amateur, voluntary and commercial sectors".

Voluntary Arts can proudly claim to have played a significant role in this transformation of Arts Council England's strategy and their recognition of the important role amateur arts play in its successful delivery.







**David Brownlee,  
Managing Director,  
PURPLE SEVEN**

*It doesn't seem that long ago that 'Great Art' was seen as all important in cultural policy. 'Excellent' artists were needed to make it happen and the rest of us normal people were lucky if we could watch.*

*We have come a long way in a short time, but I don't believe Arts Council England would have been able to launch a bold and inclusive strategy like 'Let's Create' in 2020 without the tireless work of Voluntary Arts over many years to ensure the creativity of every individual is nurtured and valued.*

#### **Barbara Eifler, Chief Executive, Making Music**



*Making Music is the UK association for leisure-time music, with around 3,600 groups in membership, comprising around 210,000 hobby musicians. Our members' activities are clearly exactly the kind of community participation which Voluntary Arts has been supporting and championing for 30 years.*

*As an organisation, we are focussed on the day to day of helping our member groups, and have limited capacity to engage in the vigorous advocacy work which is needed to really shift the narrative at government and stakeholder level. We believe that Voluntary Arts, embracing and representing the whole leisure-time sector of arts and crafts activities, has been doing a fantastic job on all our behalf to achieve much greater recognition of the potential of everyday creativity and the conditions it needs to flourish.*

*This is reflected in much of the recent research which Voluntary Arts has contributed to and which is now influencing government and stakeholder thinking, for example the Warwick Commission report of 2015, the Everyday Creativity report in 2016 and Towards Cultural Democracy in 2018.*

**Laura Dyer, Deputy Chief Executive Places & Engagement,  
Arts Council England**



*Like most people working in the arts, my first experiences and engagement with culture was through the amateur arts sector. It enthused and fed my passion which ultimately led me to pursuing a career in the arts. Without those organisations I doubt I would have taken that path.*

*Over the last 30 years, Voluntary Arts has been supporting people across the UK to take part in creative activity as part of their everyday lives. Their continued support for the voluntary arts sector, helping them to develop their boards, understand new legislation, and reach more people, has been extremely valuable and helped to both promote and raise awareness of this important sector.*

*As we move into our new strategy, Let's Create, where the creativity of each and every one of us is valued and given the chance to flourish at every stage of life, the work of organisations like Voluntary Arts and the festivals and activities they promote will be as vital as ever. We would like to extend our warmest congratulations on its 30 year celebrations.*

29.

**2020**

**#CreativeNetwork**

In response to the Coronavirus crisis, on 17 March 2020 Voluntary Arts started to run an open Zoom session every morning. #CreativeNetwork was designed as a daily online get-together, open to anyone involved in arts, culture and creativity who would welcome the opportunity to talk to others about dealing with the Covid-19 crisis, the challenges of working from home and what we can do together to make the most of difficult circumstances.

During 2020, over 150 daily discussions attracted a total of 2,000 participants from across the world. Special guests included Darren Henley, Deborah Bull, Hilary Carty, Karl Wilding, Beeban Kidron, Nick Capaldi, Chenine Bhathena and Julia Unwin. The sessions became an amazing experiment – a creative thinktank for the sector – and a very effective way of building connections during this challenging period.



**Julia Davis**

*A year on and I remember vividly the sense of safety and comfort the everyday Zoom sessions created a few weeks into our first lockdown. The regular hour whizzed past, hosted brilliantly with breakout rooms on Zoom – a bizarrely “new” thing then.*

*One Friday we were asked to do something “creative” and share the experience. The sessions inspired my story ‘Love on the Line’, now published both by Scottish Book Trust and in Terra Two, online and hopefully in print shortly.*

### **Pragya Kumar, Visual Arts Practitioner & Community Artist**



*I have been regularly attending the Creative Network by Voluntary Arts and have found it immensely useful. I have made new connections and met like-minded creative people from all over the country. Some of these connections have helped make new collaborations for new projects, whilst others were valuable as we reflected and shared our creative practice.*

*Creative Network is a great example of how the sector adapted to the challenges during the pandemic and devised new ways to connect the creatives together.*

# 2020

## Common Ground - Rewilding the Garden

In November 2020, Voluntary Arts published 'Common Ground - Rewilding the Garden', a report based on an ambitious programme of work investigating how creative activity is supported in areas of socio-economic deprivation across the UK and Ireland. The report shows this activity to be thriving in many areas that are regularly overlooked by the cultural sector, but this grassroots activity is in need of significant support and recognition.

The research identified three overarching benefits that arise from taking part in creative cultural activity: social connectedness and community identity; fun and enjoyment - "My time"; positive impacts on participants' health and wellbeing. It also categorised three requisites for local creative cultural activity: space; creative citizens; recognition - and called on local and national arts and cultural policy makers and influencers to make three simple pledges to encourage creative cultural activity in every community.

### Nick Capaldi, Chief Executive, The Arts Council of Wales



*The Covid pandemic has been a period of great anxiety and uncertainty. But it's also been a time of reflection as we re-imagine the needs and opportunities of a new future.*

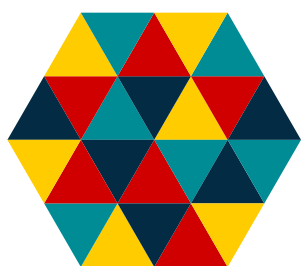
*Voluntary Arts has always championed vigorously the cause of creativity and enjoyment in our everyday lives. Its recent report, 'Common Ground: Rewilding the Garden', invites us to "build back better" and promote creativity in ways that are fairer and more inclusive. The report marks another important achievement in Voluntary Arts' 30 year history of campaigning and advocacy.*

# Conclusion and thanks

We would like to thank everyone for their support and encouragement over the years, including staff, trustees, volunteers, funders and partners. The achievements set out in this document could not have been carried out without working collaboratively with individuals and organisations who share our values and vision for a more inclusive creative future for all.

We have chosen not to name the particular individuals involved in each of the 30 moments celebrated in this document as it would be impossible to credit everyone properly. There are many people who have contributed to the organisation and its journey over the years and we are indebted to them all.

As we relaunch as Creative Lives we will continue to celebrate, encourage and champion people expressing themselves creatively in their everyday lives and practising their creativity socially with other people.



# Creative Lives





Picture of David Bryan, Chair of Creative Lives



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