OFFICIAL REPORT
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Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 11 May 2023

Session 6

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CONSTITUTION, EUROPE, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND CULTURE COMMITTEE
15th Meeting 2023, Session 6

CONVENER

*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
*Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)
*Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con)
*Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
*Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Sarah Latto (Volunteer Scotland)
Jemma Neville (Creative Lives)
Alison Reeves (Making Music)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

James Johnston

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 11 May 2023

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]

Culture in Communities

The Convener (Clare Adamson): Good morning, and a warm welcome to the 15th meeting in 2023 of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee.

Our first agenda item is to take evidence in our culture in communities inquiry, which is focused on taking a place-based approach to culture. This morning, we are delighted to be joined by Jemma Neville, director, Creative Lives; Sarah Latto, policy officer, Volunteer Scotland; and Alison Reeves, Scotland manager, Making Music. Welcome to the committee.

We have heard throughout our inquiry about the importance of volunteers in developing and sustaining culture in our communities. In particular, the submission from Creative Lives states:

> "volunteer-led, locally based creative groups represent the true backbone of culture in Scotland, yet it is one of the most overlooked parts of our cultural landscape."

How do the contributions of volunteers develop culture in communities? How could that be better supported?

As I quoted from the Creative Lives submission, perhaps Ms Neville should go first.

Jemma Neville (Creative Lives): I welcome the fact that we are having this conversation. As you said, volunteering can be an overlooked part of the cultural ecosystem, so the committee's inquiry is really welcome.

I am here representing Creative Lives, which was formerly known as Voluntary Arts. Creative Lives is a charity that has worked to champion all the different types of volunteer and community-led creative practice for over 30 years across five nations in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. Therefore, I bring that comparative context, as well.

It is my belief that everyone is creative, given the opportunity and self-confidence. At Creative Lives—I hope that this is helpful to our conversation—we want to address some of the systemic inequalities that can prevent people from realising their full creative potential and to be a voice for positive change.

I think that we will come on to look at some of the evidence that is emerging about trends in active participation. It might be of use to clarify what I mean by volunteering as distinct from participation by taking the example of a choir. Choirs are found in every community, by which I mean place and creative practice. The people who turn up to sing for the joy of singing, who are often from professional, community or amateur backgrounds, do so in a participatory sense. The volunteers are the ones who set up and run things and keep the choir going. They may also bring in paid support for tutoring, recording and so on.

I hope that that example helps to distinguish, because we run into muddy water if we start to have a false dichotomy involving professional, amateur and community arts. They are all interrelated.

You asked about good connectivity. It is about civic space and a reimagining of what the civic realm and the creative commons can be. It is about utilising existing venues but also our civic spaces—parks, cafes and pubs as well as libraries and the school estate, for example.

It is also about active agency and involvement. I could give committee members examples of the many voluntary arts groups that are in all of their constituencies. They might not be fully aware of all of them, because a lot of them are unseen or unheard. However, given proper agency at a community planning level and at a participatory democracy level, they have the potential to add much socioeconomic value as well as the human value of feeling good about ourselves and connecting to one another.

I will mention sustainability. You have heard persuasive evidence from academics and culture practitioners about the value of in-depth, quality interventions. My interest is in what happens before and after such interventions. How do we ensure a sustainable creative and cultural ecology? That is about ensuring that the right enabling conditions exist. Local and central Government, as well as the third sector, have a role to play in creating pathways between different opportunities, and ensuring that access is affordable and available and that different parts of the public realm all link up.

We can come to examples later on if that would be helpful, but I hope that that sets a bit of the scene.

Sarah Latto (Volunteer Scotland): I echo a lot of what Jemma Neville said. The clarity about the difference between participation and volunteering is incredibly helpful. I completely agree that volunteering is about the people who support and sustain an activity for the benefit of those who want to participate in culture.

On participation and the contribution of volunteering to culture in communities, we know that around 5 per cent of volunteers support culture and heritage in Scotland. That is around 61,000 people. However, that statistic does a bit of a disservice to the volunteers who support culture in communities, because the activity goes so much broader than that.

Jemma Neville mentioned the places where volunteering takes place. Many of them will be run by committees—groups of volunteers who are not primarily motivated by culture, but who give their time to support an asset in their community that provides a place where culture can take place.

To go back to the figures, the latest Scottish household survey showed that 30 per cent of Scotland's volunteers supported organisations in their communities. That is 370,000 people. There has been a huge increase year on year—there was about a 5 per cent increase just on the previous year. Therefore, we know that many more people volunteered to support activity in their communities.

Jemma Neville mentioned that there are examples throughout the country of the importance of volunteering for culture. When I read the Creative Lives submission alongside ours, I was struck by the fact that we said that there are about 5,000 voluntary groups that support culture in Scotland and Creative Lives had the figure of 10,000. However, that probably speaks to the fact that much of the activity is unseen. It is tiny organisations that support culture in communities.

In Volunteer Scotland, when we think about the fact that we have people who give their time to support that type of activity, we are struck by the impact of the pandemic and the fact that we subsequently went straight into the cost of living crisis. That has had an enormous impact on the voluntary sector, and particularly on the tiny, community-based organisations, because groups of trustees are trying to navigate all the challenges involved while holding down their day jobs. There are a lot of challenges in that, which I am happy to unpick as we go through the meeting.

Alison Reeves (Making Music): Good morning. It is great to be here because I am interested in explaining to you the size of the music-making sector that is not professional in Scotland. We notice that it is unseen and needs its existence to be recognised more than anything else.

Making Music is a membership association, and we have a statistical understanding only of our own membership. We have 255 groups in membership in Scotland, and about 14,000 people participate in them. Our groups tend to be larger than some of the ones that have been mentioned. Their average membership is 55. They are orchestras and more formal choirs such as choral societies but also community choirs. They could be ukulele bands or samba bands, for example.

The groups are all constituted organisations, and a lot of them are charities. All of them are run by volunteers as a committee. Very few of them have paid administration staff, and about 80 per cent of them would employ a professional music director or music leader. However, the rest of the people who organise the activity do so on a voluntary basis. They sell tickets at the doors and provide safe spaces for the vulnerable people who need extra support in their groups. They do all that work to provide that massive sector.

There are more than 50 orchestras in our membership in Scotland. That is significantly more than the number of professional orchestras. They perform three or four times a year in their communities, so they are the way that many people in our communities experience music, particularly classical music. Therefore, those volunteers bring a huge benefit to their communities.

As I said, we represent only part of the sector. We do not have pipe bands or concert bands, for example, in our membership. There is a huge amount more of that sort of activity going on, and it is hugely valuable.

The activity is reliant on an infrastructure that is challenged and very delicate. It does not require a lot of funding to keep groups running; in fact, only about 5 per cent of our members' income comes from any type of funding, including local authority or Creative Scotland funding. Their income is almost all from membership subscriptions and ticket and CD sales. However, they need their venues to be affordable and accessible, and they need to be able to get to their venues. That is the delicate infrastructure that we are most concerned about at the moment, and it will be eroded if we do not take care.

The Convener: Thank you very much. We will move to questions from members. Mr Bibby is first.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): Good morning. You have all rightly talked about the impact that the cost of living crisis is having on the cultural and voluntary sectors and on participation. Obviously, funding is important in supporting the cultural sector during the cost of living crisis.

Some of the submissions to the committee have mentioned the need for greater revenue support, but Ms Reeves talked about the level of funding and the need to invest in facilities and to make them affordable and accessible. Obviously, in Government, there is always a discussion about

whether we should prioritise revenue funding or capital funding, but we have heard about the importance of investing in community facilities and cultural venues in order to make them affordable and accessible.

My question is specifically about the voluntary sector, because its revenue costs are different from those for other organisations. Are we getting the balance right between revenue and capital? Both budgets have been squeezed, but are we getting the funding balance right in order to achieve the aims that you have set out for investing in facilities and keeping activities going through revenue support?

Jemma Neville: I understand why there is scrutiny of funding, but that can unhelpfully overdominate the discussion, because it is a truism that lots of volunteer-led creative groups are largely self-sustaining and not dependent on funding but that they need enabling conditions. The things that might prevent a group from flourishing include, for example, a lack of reliable affordable transport, which has a disproportionate impact on older people and lone women. It can mean that people cannot get out as regularly as their group meets. There is a crisis of social isolation in this country in relation to loneliness and confidence, so Government policy could be better joined up in some areas and across different strands.

09:15

On funding streams, it is a mistake to separate so-called professional creative practice and community-led creative practice, because it is an ecology in which things are inherently linked. When Creative Lives came into being 30 years ago, we talked about formal structures, umbrella bodies, guilds, associations and so on. Those things still exist—we are hearing today from Making Music, which is one of the largest—but most of us take part in creative expression through many fluid and overlapping networks, which sometimes makes it hard to quantify the data. It is all the more interesting because we have the opportunity to develop talent, try different things and, crucially, collaborate.

Funding streams in the creative sector work best when there is scope for collaboration and flexibility and when there is no hierarchy, although I recognise that volunteer-led groups can be huge in their scale and reach. For example, there are Scotland-wide amateur orchestras, just as there are very informal networks and creative communities who get together regularly to do their particular thing.

All that is in the mix, which can make it difficult, as I said, to test the data. Less than 10 per cent of the groups that Creative Lives is regularly in touch with have a venue or capital costs, so they are much more likely to want regular access to existing facilities in their community. That flexibility is critical. We know that from things such as our annual big conversation survey, which also gave us information about groups keeping in touch and getting back in touch with people face to face following the pandemic.

Sarah Latto: I absolutely agree. Neil Bibby mentioned the impact of the cost of living crisis. Volunteer Scotland has been publishing a quarterly bulletin that explores the impact, as it emerges, of the cost of living crisis on volunteering. One data source that we have used is the third sector tracker that our colleagues at the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations, together with the Scottish Government, have been very helpfully publishing. That data shows the stark impact of the crisis on cost increases—Jemma Neville mentioned some of those things—but there has also been an increase in demand for services.

There is also a significant challenge around volunteering. About 30 per cent of the organisations that responded to the latest version of the third sector tracker are struggling with volunteer shortages. There are two sides to that. First, there is the challenge that organisations do not have adequate resources to support volunteers. In relation to where funding is best placed, we should definitely think about providing support to organisations to best engage volunteers.

Secondly, volunteers as individuals are not immune to the impact of the cost of living crisis. We know that a lot of volunteers are still fairly fatigued after the pandemic. There might be a sense of apathy about living in a permacrisis, with people feeling, “What can my volunteering do to change things?”

I was struck by something else when I was reading some of the other responses to the committee inquiry. Craignish village hall said that it has been trying to keep culture accessible to people by providing a third of its events for free, but it is struggling to do that because it does not have the resources to do so. That speaks to another potential issue in relation to funding, which is equality of access to culture. It is important to consider that. I completely appreciate that a lot of voluntary arts groups are self-sustaining and rely on charging for some of their services, but what about the people who do not have the money to pay to access culture in their community? That is the challenge. There is a need for funding to support equality of access to culture.

If Craignish village hall is struggling to continue to provide a third of its services for free, there are

probably similar situations for organisations across the rest of Scotland. In relation to culture organisations that have typically been able to provide some resources for free, if they do not own the hall and the rent for that hall is increasing, and if the people who usually access their cultural services cannot afford to pay more, it is a bit of a catch-22 situation. That is where funding is most needed at the moment.

Alison Reeves: It might help if I explain what the finances of groups such as our members look like. The greatest expense is venue hire. Most groups do not use arts venues. More than half our members use churches and church hall spaces, but that is proving a significant challenge at the moment, as the Church of Scotland rationalises its estate. About 20 per cent use schools and educational facilities. That proved a challenge following Covid, because it took quite a long time for some of the school estate to open up to external lets, which meant that our members had to look for other venues—sometimes, those were commercial lets. About 12 per cent use community or village halls. We have heard about Craignish and the challenges there.

All our members would tell you that their costs for venue hire are increasing. We have not done an analysis of that, but the ones we have spoken to about it have told us that that is definitely happening or about to happen. Many of our members are having to think about a move because of the church hall change. We do not yet know whether that will result in there being less space available for our groups to rehearse and perform in—it might be the case that, because there are so many church halls, there are enough for everyone, even if the estate is rationalised—but they are definitely thinking about that.

As I said, a large percentage of the income of our groups comes from their own members. They are very reluctant to raise those subs or fees for the reason that Sarah Latto gave: those members are experiencing challenges with their own incomes.

You might expect the funding for our type of groups to come through arts funding, but that is not where it comes from. It does not come from Creative Scotland. Only a very small number of our groups apply to Creative Scotland. That will be for music development activity. For example, Aberdeenshire Saxophone Orchestra obtained some funding to buy expensive larger saxophones so that it could lend them to members who would not have been able to afford to buy them. The Glasgow School of Art Choir has just commissioned seven female composers to write some music for it to perform this May.

That is the type of funding that our groups would apply for, rather than money for running costs. That infrastructure funding really makes a difference for them. Having publicly owned, accessible and financially available spaces is fundamental.

The Convener: Before we go back to Neil Bibby, a couple of members wish to ask supplementary questions.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I was interested in what you said about the fact that a lot of the volunteering work is done by people who are already leading busy lives and have jobs. At the same time, you mentioned social isolation and loneliness. Is there any way of addressing the issue of isolation and loneliness and, at the same time, bringing in a wider, more diverse group of people into that type of volunteering? I do not pretend that that is a simple problem to solve, but I would be interested to hear any observations that you might have.

Sarah Latto: In 2018, we did some research into the health and wellbeing benefits of volunteering, and we found that there was conclusive evidence that volunteering helps to address social isolation and loneliness. The challenge that we face with volunteering is that those people who are likely to benefit the most do not participate in it. There are challenges around the accessibility of volunteering, which have increased as a result of the cost of living crisis.

An example of that is travel expenses. Many volunteers do not have the spare money to enable them to pay for their travel expenses, and about half the organisations that advertise opportunities on our opportunities database do not provide travel expenses; most of them cannot afford to do so. There is a challenge in making volunteering more accessible so that those groups who would benefit the most from it can participate.

We come back to Mr Bibby's point about resource. There is a need to increase resource to provide supported volunteering opportunities so that those people who are most likely to experience social isolation and loneliness can participate more.

I agree with your point, however. Inclusion is one of the central tenets of "Scotland's Volunteering Action Plan", which was published last year, and a lot of the actions in it are about improving accessibility. I feel like the will is there, but the fact that we are currently dealing with a cost of living crisis, which is exacerbating a lot of those barriers, makes it quite challenging.

Jemma Neville: It is a good question that has some complexities to it. First, the good news is that our own survey shows that 67 per cent of people say that they are no longer reluctant to meet in person post pandemic. The hesitancy is from new mothers and older people, among the

450 people who responded to the survey. There is a diversity of cultures—plural—across Scotland, much of which we do not see or hear, but loneliness and social isolation are clearly systemic.

I have some examples of initiatives that we are undertaking, in Scotland and elsewhere, to address that. First, however, I point out that, structurally, it would be tremendously helpful if the Scottish Government and local government could link up their policies and practices under tackling social isolation and loneliness, and the equalities division of national Government, with the cultural brief in order to acknowledge that those aspects are inherently connected.

At Creative Lives, we have experience at a grass-roots level in distributing what we call microgrants. We are not a funder ourselves, but sometimes we will distribute small seed money, in very modest amounts—most recently £300—to different groups. We did that on behalf of the Scottish Community Alliance pockets and prospects fund, which is Government money. That went to groups in order to tackle some of the practical, mundane issues such as utilities, heat, light, rent and insurance.

For example, RIG Arts in Greenock used the money to upscale its facilities so that it could be more inclusive of people with physical and cognitive disabilities. Sewing2gether All Nations in Paisley, in Renfrewshire, used that modest £300 to book taxis for refugee and asylum-seeking women to enable them to come to the craft workshops that it was hosting. That is an example of how such an approach—it is not just a tiny bit of money, but a vote of confidence—can go a long way.

There is some interesting work happening in England, commissioned by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport as part of the know your neighbourhood scheme, which is based on the current popularity of 15-minute or 20-minute neighbourhoods. The DCMS is tasking Creative Lives and others with doing some targeted interventions in economically deprived parts of England to encourage voluntary arts groups to be proactive in welcoming and including people who are at risk of social isolation and loneliness. That work is just beginning, and it will be really interesting for Scotland to follow that.

We have also been partnering with the pub is the hub campaign and the Campaign for Real Ale, again in England, to reimagine pubs as creative spaces that both support that part of the economy and are very much badged as creative, welcoming spaces. People can make use of those spaces as a venue, in urban and rural settings, particularly in the day time, and it would be great to see that in Scotland. We could also make better use of libraries, and some work is under way with colleagues at the Scottish Library and Information Council to promote libraries as places that not only welcome creativity but are warm, dry and accessible spaces.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): Good morning to the panel, and thank you for being with us. I want to follow up on Sarah Latto's first two answers.

In your first answer, you identified one particular community organisation that had seen a 5 per cent increase in its volunteering, but in your second answer you talked about the challenges of the cost of living and how that has had the impact of hampering volunteering. Are there any specifics from the example that you gave in your first answer that would be worth considering with regard to why that particular organisation has seen an increase in volunteering?

09:30

Sarah Latto: It was not necessarily one organisation; that 5 per cent increase is in the number of volunteers in Scotland who are supporting community-based activity. The volunteer participation rate in Scotland has remained static, at about 26 per cent or 27 per cent, but we have seen a 5 per cent increase in community-based volunteering, which is interesting.

It is quite a difficult situation, because we rely on Scottish household survey results to find out about participation rates. We have just received the results for 2021, which were incredibly interesting and are helping us to see how volunteering participation is changing as we come out of the pandemic, but we do not yet fully understand the impact of the cost of living crisis on volunteering, because we are not quite there yet with the facts and figures. Based on existing evidence, we have an idea that—for the reasons that I mentioned—there are some struggles with recruiting new volunteers and that volunteers are also struggling.

It is interesting that community-based volunteering rates have increased, because that is kind of bucking the trend and the available evidence that we have about the impact of the cost of living crisis. It has probably happened a result of the pandemic, as people have become more community focused. That is important when we talk about the cultural activity that is taking place in communities, because there is a strong likelihood that some of that 5 per cent are in organisations that are focused on culture.

A bit of a silver lining of the cloud of the cost of living crisis is that people have become more participative in their communities and they are

helping out a lot more. I do not know if that helped or answered your question.

Ben Macpherson: That was very helpful, thank you.

Alison Reeves: I am thinking about the word "volunteer", because I think that a lot of the people whom we would count as volunteers in Making Music member groups would not count themselves as volunteers. They take part in their choir, they sing and they organise the rota for the tea or organise ticket sales at the door, so they do not count themselves as volunteers, but we do.

That is really important when we think about inclusion and what is the driver for somebody to volunteer. If the driver is their own participation and that they do something as a leisure activity, then that is a bigger driver than going on to a Volunteer Scotland website and volunteering their time to another activity. However, volunteers of that participant type are just as crucial to the infrastructure as other types of volunteer—such as board members or those who do not otherwise take part in an activity. We know all of the benefits that volunteering has for communities, and we need to remember to count participatory volunteers as well as those who volunteer in a more formal way.

When we ask those in our groups if they can count their volunteering hours, they sometimes shake their heads and think twice about it, because they do not always count their hours, but then when they do, they realise that they spend a huge amount of their own time volunteering.

The Convener: That is an interesting point. In the household survey, you rely on people identifying as volunteers. Maybe a hall keeper from a church who opens it up for a dance lesson would not consider themselves a volunteer, so that is interesting.

Neil Bibby: I want to follow up on the concern that was raised about the Church of Scotland closures. I am picking up that there is concern about that among the congregations in my area, but also among community groups that use the churches. I do not know whether that concern is shared by other voluntary groups in Scotland. It seems to be a looming problem, but I am not sure whether it is replicated in other areas. Could the witnesses expand on that?

Alison Reeves: Jemma Neville would have a better perspective on the whole of the sector, but given the way in which our members take part in music making, they need a certain size of space as well as a certain type of space. Churches and church halls are absolutely ideal for that. In addition, their acoustics tend to be excellent. Sometimes, when a new community hub is built, we find that those spaces are not as good for music making. Therefore, we have a particular concern about the situation because, as I said, more than half our groups use churches and church halls.

I will tell you a bit about Inverurie, for example, where we have in our membership a concert band, an orchestra, a choral society and a saxophone orchestra, and that is in a town of 14,000 people. In Aberdeenshire, the church is considering closing half of the 45 church buildings in that area. About half the groups that I mentioned use church buildings. As I said, we are not sure whether there are too many buildings for the amount of activity. We are yet to see that, but our members are telling us that they are either having to move or that another group will be coming in to use the church building within the next couple of years, so people are having to budge up.

Jemma Neville: I agree with Alison Reeves. The issue is broader than the Church of Scotland—we are talking about all faith-based buildings, many of which are underutilised or have disproportionate running costs to make them affordable, safe and accessible.

I go back to the original premise of the question about linking people to groups and finding out what is available. Voluntary arts groups are part of the solution in that they mobilise a lot in their communities. We saw that a lot during Covid, when they pivoted to becoming welcoming safe spaces that offered not only the value of creative expression but regular meet-ups, which is really important. Knowing that you can be somewhere and that you are expected somewhere regularly is hugely beneficial; all sorts of data show that.

Therefore, we need to normalise that in the same way that sport does. Points have been made about that by other witnesses to your committee. There is so much that we could learn about the infrastructure links in voluntary, community and professional sport and how those could be replicated in many ways with culture.

With regard to what is happening well, that often relates to regeneration targets. I could cite examples of where there has been investment in buildings—such as faith-based buildings—as part of the regeneration process. However, that is not happening day to day, because culture does not sit at the community planning table. That needs to change.

Sarah Latto: I completely agree that the fact that a lot of church buildings across the country will potentially close is a particular concern for many organisations. In many of those communities, you are likely to find that the community will take on the management of the building, because that is what happens a lot of the time.

We have the Scottish Government's commitment to community wealth building, and we have the review of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. There is a push for many of these assets to move into community ownership, which is great, but we find that communities struggle to have the capacity to take on that level of liability for an asset. Volunteers have also been telling us about that in our consultation activities for our community wealth building consultation response, which we submitted this week. Therefore, there is a need for additional support. In fact, we have seen that there is a level of cynicism about community wealth building.

One volunteer said—this stuck in my head—that he feels that assets are being offloaded on to communities but that they just have to put up with it. If they want to keep that asset, they need to put in the time to keep it open.

We might find that the same thing happens with a lot of the church closures. The community will step up because it will not want to lose that space, as it is important for their cultural activity. However, there is a question about whether it is voluntary if somebody feels that they have to take it on for the benefit of the community. That goes back to the points that we made earlier about the cost of living crisis and the challenges of owning big, draughty church halls and the associated energy costs. There is a resource issue and a support challenge there for the volunteers who support community-based assets.

I will not go into too much detail, but I know that, this afternoon, the Parliament will debate the Charities (Regulation and Administration) (Scotland) Bill. Volunteer Scotland raised the concern that some of the criteria in the bill will make diversity of trustees challenging, which is a problem if we want community-based assets to be truly owned by the full demographic of the community and want everyone to participate. There are those kinds of issues, too.

The Convener: That point is well made.

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I read the Creative Lives submission and was very struck by the opening pages, which talk about a sense of optimism despite the challenges that we have spoken about, which are very real and serious. There seems to be an uptick in optimism about volunteering, with the average number of hours having gone up in the past few years. Is that sense of an increase in optimism shared by Sarah Latto and Alison Reeves? What reasons beyond the pandemic and the sense of community togetherness that you have spoken about might there be for that slightly rosier view?

Sarah Latto: I was equally pleased when I read that. It is easy to get bogged down in the challenges, which goes back to the point that I made earlier. We were really struck when we saw the Scottish household survey results that showed an increase in community-based volunteering. I imagine that what we are seeing is a legacy of the pandemic—as I mentioned, it is a silver lining to the cloud. People feel much more connected with their communities because they spent so much time in them during the pandemic. You will probably find that, because of the cost of living crisis, people are relying more on other people in their communities.

I am thinking about how much it costs to go to the cinema nowadays. If a community-based group provides entertainment that costs a lot less, people might stay in their community and take part in that instead. There is probably an element of people feeling like hunkering down and staying in their communities as a result of the challenges that they face.

Alison Reeves: Interestingly, our membership has not changed since the pandemic; in fact, it did not change during the pandemic. We have not seen a change in the number of groups in Scotland. Our members perhaps have slightly smaller memberships than they used to, but that is not the case for all of them. Some of them have had massive increases in membership.

That is phenomenal, because for two years those groups were not allowed to sing together at all. They managed to keep members of the group connected by singing on Zoom, singing outside, playing in community spaces and parks and all the other incredible things that they did. That was so valued by the members of those groups and the people in their communities, and that is what has kept people connected to those groups.

The understanding that their involvement was about more than just being a member of a music group kept them connected, too. Members of groups would chap on one another's doors and take one another food. I remember watching an excellent BBC journalist's piece about a brass band where the gentleman was crying because he missed his friends so much, and they managed to stay connected. The fact that those things are hugely valuable to the people in those groups is what has kept them going.

People want that now. It is an inexpensive activity. As has been said, groups will charge between £2 and £6 per session at the most, if the activity is not free. That is considerably less than the cost of going to the swimming pool, for example. It is an inexpensive activity that is loved by the people in those communities. It is absolutely the case that we do not see that dropping away.

09:45

Donald Cameron: Jemma Neville, do you want to add anything?

Jemma Neville: In general, our active creative participation remains local. Although we might travel into a city centre to attend a concert, where we take part tends to be in a hyperlocal space, and that has built soft resilience skills in communities most recently.

However, I add a note of caution to some of that optimism. There is some collective fatigue or burn-out in people who are running groups. There is an issue about the ageing demographic, there are some skills development issues and there remains a digital divide in Scotland.

In addition, it can be tricky to find out what is available locally. The Mental Health Foundation tells us that, last year, more than three quarters of adults in Scotland reported being lonely at some point, and more than half of them said that it would have helped if they could have found out what regular meet-ups were available to them locally. It is still sometimes quite challenging for people to find out what is there.

Creative Lives would like to work with local authorities to address some of their current capacity challenges. There has been a decimation of local arts development officers in local authorities, and we also have the spinning out into cultural trusts, which has its own opportunities and challenges. However, we can work with local authorities to map what voluntary arts are in their area, how signposting can be better, how some of that skills development can be done and where micro grants have a role to play. We would like to offer that to local authorities. It is already being done. We had a pilot in Calderdale in Yorkshire, so we know that it works.

Donald Cameron: Thank you for those answers. I have one more question about unmet cultural need. Creative Scotland's submission to the committee said that some cultural practices do not necessarily take place traditionally in theatres or music venues. In Creative Scotland's view, its role is to provide the infrastructure, then get out of the way and allow local artists or performers to take over. Do you have any observations on that from the perspective of the volunteer? How can we develop and enhance that unmet cultural need? I will start with Alison Reeves, please.

Alison Reeves: In working with our members, most of our role is in supporting volunteer committees to play their role well. That includes supporting good governance, looking after finances, applying for orchestra tax relief and gift aid and providing the infrastructure for the things that volunteer committee members need to do. We do that for our members. They are only 255 groups and they have to pay for that service. Those are things that all volunteers who lead cultural activity would benefit from. Our members are very grateful for our service. However, as I said, we provide it for a fee and we do not do it not for everybody. Many volunteer committees are charities, so they have to submit returns to the charities regulator, which they find challenging. It puts people off sitting on a committee and shortens the length of time for which they are likely to sit on the committee, especially if things get complicated.

There is not the same professional development support for volunteer-led arts activities as there is for the professional arts—apart from for members of Making Music or people who can use the Creative Lives services, of course. Many volunteers do not have access to such support, or do not choose to take it up.

Jemma Neville: To go back to first principles, I say that I believe that all of us are inherently creative, when we are given the opportunity and confidence to be so. Some of us might want to develop a talent individually or to bob and weave between professional practice and community voluntary practice. I would reframe your question about need as being about connecting and valuing sustainable practice better. What are we not seeing and hearing in our diverse culture? What gets funded and what does not, and why?

When I say that voluntary groups are rarely dependent on, or rarely want to depend on, short-term funding streams, I should add that volunteering and setting up groups is not free. Groups need support from infrastructure bodies like us for skills development and for linking up with other groups and opportunities locally, nationally and internationally.

In addition, conceptually, we need to think about how we can make paid interventions sustainable. We talk about artists in residence, for example, and the valuable contributions that have been made to communities through the likes of Culture Collective and some of the regeneration work that has been going on in local authorities. However, what about—if I may put it like this—-the residents in art: those who were there all along, doing things? What happens to them after those interventions end? In addition, the various barriers, both short and long term, that we have discussed previously, are all part of the question on need that you are asking.

Sarah Latto: I completely agree, in particular with what Alison Reeves said about capacity building for volunteers, especially those in governance roles, being incredibly important. Organisations are very fortunate if they can get support from bodies such as Creative Lives. The

TSI Scotland Network is also important in that space.

That goes back to my earlier point about equality of participation and equality of access for volunteering in those types of roles. The capacity that is required for a governance role in particular can be quite challenging and daunting for a lot of people. There is a need to think about building the capacity of volunteers.

It is great to see that there is a page in "A Culture Strategy for Scotland" on volunteering, which is wonderful—I was quite struck by it. I am also interested in the best practice guide for volunteering that is promised in that strategy, and the fact that it will be aligned with the volunteer charter.

As Jemma Neville rightly said, volunteering is unpaid but it is not free. Resources are required to support it, and the volunteer charter sets out the principles for appropriate and sustainable volunteering. What is missing within that, however, is something about building capacity and an acknowledgement that volunteers are, more often than not, driven by their passion for a particular cultural activity. They are not necessarily driven by the fact that they have in their professional life certain skills that they want to bring to a particular role.

There is a need to join the dots and to help people to do things such as their OSCR returns—if the organisation is a registered charity—which can be challenging. I hope to see Creative Scotland taking on a bigger role in acknowledgement of the capacity that is required in order for volunteers to support community-based cultural activity.

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): I want to ask about the capacity to attract funding, in particular because writing comprehensive bids can prove to be challenging for smaller organisations. Linked to that, what metrics are funders looking for and how does that land? Who would like to start? Alison Reeves wants to come in.

Alison Reeves: I am currently filling in a Creative Scotland application form for the open fund. It is the first time that I have done that using the new portal system that it has established, which technically is working brilliantly but the process is very long and complicated. Creative Scotland has to make it that way because it is accountable for that spend. I have to write 450 words about my risk management strategy, for example. You can see the challenge for groups in doing that; it is difficult. I have been filling in funding applications for my entire career, but for someone who is singing in a choir who wants to apply for money for a commission, it is a big challenge. We used to have a local authority pot of arts funding and an arts officer who would help people to apply.

This week, I also filled in an application for the community grants fund for my school's parent council. The application was two pages of A4 and it was free form, so I could write what I liked. I think that I wrote two sentences in one of the boxes, and we got £4,000; it was that easy. The amount of work that I have to put in to apply for the Creative Scotland fund is significantly more for the same amount of money.

Creative Scotland has been very clear with us that it will always accept applications from volunteer-led music groups, that the applications would be treated exactly the same as they would treat a professional application and that it really wants the applications, but the fact is that it is extremely difficult to make them.

It depends on who the funder is, but the quick and easy-to-access pots of money that local authorities used to hold are, in our experience, entirely gone, so micro-grants—such as those that Creative Lives can offer—are the types of funding that our groups would be much better placed to apply for.

Jemma Neville: Creative Lives is not a funder, but historically we have distributed some funds. Some light-touch flexible funding can go a long way.

We also have guidance on various developmental support for groups. At the moment, the most popular one is called "Cash for Culture", which is a research publication that Creative Scotland helped us to promote. It gives examples and case studies of different ways that cash has been generated, and not only through funding applications. There are a lot of examples of collaborations and there is a reimagining of how income can be generated.

It goes back to the principle that such things should be open access. For a long time, so-called amateur groups had chips on their shoulders about being seen as hobbyists or somehow as lesser artists, but some of the work of voluntary-run groups is of extremely high quality, and for some it is more about the participatory experience. It is all that and everything in between, so it is welcome that the hierarchies have gone and we have open access.

It would be a mistake if we thought about voluntary participation as always being small scale—sometimes it is vast. It can be national, regional or hyperlocal. All that is in the mix.

Sarah Latto: Jemma Neville said that voluntary participation can be on a large scale. One example of that, which we reference in our submission, is Pittenweem arts festival. I am from

Fife and I have been to Pittenweem arts festival; it is a sight to behold. It is a huge event, and it is almost entirely run by volunteers. I think that it has a part-time office manager, but most of it is led by volunteers. It is one of the largest arts festivals in Scotland—if not the largest.

It goes back to capacity-building support. We work quite closely with Impact Funding Partners, which distributes quite a lot of funding for the Scottish Government, including the volunteering support fund. It hosts regular networking events where people who have given funding for volunteering can share best practice. Many Impact Funding Partners funding recipients find that incredibly beneficial.

Funders could be more open to and aware of the challenges that people who are trying to access funding might experience and could provide more support when people are applying. That would be incredibly useful.

10:00

The Convener: Before I turn to Mr Ruskell, I have a question. Sarah Latto mentioned the TSI Scotland Network. Can you explain what that is, please?

Sarah Latto: It is the Third Sector Interface Scotland Network. Every local authority has a third sector interface to support the local voluntary sector and volunteering in Scotland. TSIs are funded by the Government, and the local authority usually provides some funding, as well. TSIs provide support for volunteering, and for applying for funding, finding funding, capacity building and all sorts of other things. They work closely with community learning and development teams in local government, which also provide capacity building support.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I want to come back on a couple of things that have been mentioned. Jemma Neville said that we need to normalise support for cultural organisations, as we have done for sporting organisations. Have I picked that up correctly? Can I get your perspectives on what that means? When I look at how sport is supported in my community, I see arm's-length external organisations and sport and leisure trusts doing club sport development, and I see engagement in schools to encourage young people to get into sports clubs and try out new sports.

Is there a corollary, or are culture and music different? What is missing? Your organisations are trying to provide some of that support and development on a national basis, and the TSI Scotland Network provides similar support, but what is the missing bit that would give culture and music development and support that are equivalent to what sport has?

Jemma Neville: There needs to be a mindset shift, in part, about normalising the many benefits of creative participation. Intrinsically and instrumentally, it has many individual and collective benefits. We take that as a given for physical exercise, but we have to make a case for creative participation. We have a lot of evidence about the many benefits, including mental health benefits, lessening isolation and increasing longevity. Some of the stuff that is now coming out is the result of decades of research.

The comparison with sport is relevant when it comes to community planning, because there is often a seat at the table for sport but not for art. That goes to the heart of reimagining civic space, including the school estate, green spaces, our parks and the high streets in our cities and towns.

This is also about opportunity. Sport and physical activity are integrated in our school experience, but in many communities the provision of musical instruments, for example, is very limited, which has a knock-on effect on lifelong participation. Further education, evening classes and so on provide opportunities, connections and pathways into the voluntary arts. We lose that at our peril.

Alison Reeves: We work with the Music Education Partnership Group, which is piloting a programme called "We make music" for schools. It is designed to be like the active schools programme, but for music. The school would work towards different levels of awards. An activity that a school could do to get an award could be to provide instrumental tuition for the children in the school. Other activities include the school connecting with music organisations that could come into the school to deliver projects; the school using youth music initiative funding to run its own projects; or the school connecting with community music activity—for example, a pipe band in the area coming into the school and working with the children.

That programme is funded, I believe, by the Government, as a pilot. That is a good example of how in the school environment a programme like active schools that would work for music and arts could be built. That has knock-on benefits for lifelong music-making activity. We know that if people come out of school believing that they cannot make music or even sing, they will not continue doing it as adults, so such activity can be built on.

Mark Ruskell: Do you want to come in, Sarah?

Sarah Latto: I do not have a huge amount to add, to be honest. Alison Reeves talked about the active schools programme. The number of

volunteers who support that programme is extraordinary and it is well embedded.

I was reflecting on the situation with Sistema Scotland, which runs the Big Noise orchestra. It lost its funding from a number of local authorities earlier in the year and it looked like some of its music-making projects were going to close their doors but, luckily, the Government was able to step in. When we talk about a culture shift, we have to recognise the importance of cultural activity, particularly in deprived communities. It is really important for them to be able to access such opportunities.

I have loads of evidence about the benefits of volunteering for wellbeing. When I was preparing for the meeting, I was struck by how much is comparable in respect of the benefits that cultural activity and volunteering provide for wellbeing. One example sprang to mind that would be nice to share. I have been speaking recently to an organisation called Playlist for Life. I do not know whether members have heard of it. It provides a lovely model that is about helping people who have had a dementia diagnosis to develop playlists. That recognises the importance of the link between music and memory. Music helps to bring people back to themselves for a short amount of time and can slow the progress of dementia.

We need to recognise that throughout their lives, the arts and culture have an enormous impact on people. As Jemma Neville said, we need to normalise that. In schools, every child gets physical education, even if they do not take it as a subject. When I was in school, I did not want to take PE but I was made to do it. However, music and the arts are not things that children have to do, which is a bit of a shame.

Mark Ruskell: Thank you—that was useful.

Jemma Neville talked about "fluid and overlapping networks". That brings us back to the point about how we define a cultural organisation. When I walk into organisations that might be working on climate change and transition, I see that they are full of creative people who are making things and doing incredible creative projects. Those organisations are probably not creative cultural organisations, but they are creating culture. How do we map that out? There seems to be a lot of overlap. Should we think more about a creative sector than a cultural one?

Jemma Neville: I agree 100 per cent. Mapping is a perennial challenge. Creative Lives is not a membership body and we do not define what is or is not creative cultural activity. That is self-defining; for many people, it will be about something as fluid as gardening or cookery. If that is important to people and they can make use of our developmental support, that is grand. The climate emergency affects us all and there will be many creative responses to, and challenges in, how we tackle it together.

Taking part in creative activity as a civic experience to shape the decisions that affect you links into social, economic and cultural rights. All that stuff is intrinsically interlinked. We are talking about education, housing and all manner of things that link into cultural rights.

Mark Ruskell: Yes—and the need for agency.

My last question concerns 20-minute neighbourhoods. That concept was mentioned in a number of the submissions, and it was interesting to hear about some of the work on it in England. In Scotland, it is still very much seen as a planning concept—it is in the national planning framework—but do you have examples of cultural organisations in Scotland that have actively planned around 20-minute neighbourhoods? I am thinking in particular of high streets starting to close down and people starting to rethink spaces. As major retailers shut down post Covid, they left big spaces that people are thinking about how to fill creatively.

Alison Reeves: We worked with Culture Counts on a submission in relation to the national planning framework redraft, so we are pleased that spaces for culture and creativity are in the national planning framework. It recognises that having such spaces available is one of the things that make a successful and healthy neighbourhood. It is important that that is in the NPF and that we all know that it is in there.

The concept of 15 or 20-minute neighbourhoods is possibly less useful to some of the activity that our members take part in because it is larger scale. However, the idea that, within a community, there should be an easy-to-access and appropriate space that is large enough for music, dance, drama or performing arts activity needs to be understood as an issue that is about more than what can happen on high streets, for example.

There is a concept, which I think is Japanese, that involves a 15-minute neighbourhood and then a 45-minute neighbourhood, which is about where services for a larger group of people are situated. That is also important to recognise. There cannot be a performance space within a 20-minute walk of every community, but there could be one within a 45-minute travelling time. That is a real challenge at the moment when places such as Howden Park arts centre in Livingston are being threatened with closure and we lost Falkirk town hall last year, which was problematic. It is not just about small neighbourhoods; it is also about larger ones.

Jemma Neville: There is also an issue about where you live and how relevant 15 or 20 minutes is. I live rurally now, and I would be in the fields or on the beach if I was looking at such a radius. For rural communities, we need to think much more about affordable and reliable transport, which we mentioned earlier.

The point is that we need joined-up experiences to lead a meaningful life. Why can a library card not also get you on to the bus or give you access to the swimming pool and the theatre? Why are we not connecting up all those things? It could all be so much simpler than it is, wherever we live in Scotland.

A couple of examples spring to mind. There is the work that is being done in Dumfries on its historic high street and Midsteeple Quarter. The Stove Network has been instrumental in galvanising local communities there. Deveron Arts in Huntly has the brand, "The town is the venue". I would encourage you to look at those examples.

Mark Ruskell: [*Inaudible*.]—Deveron Arts previously.

Jemma Neville: Excellent.

Sarah Latto: I could give you other similar examples.

Mark Ruskell: That is great—thank you.

The Convener: Another area that has come up frequently in our evidence sessions is the idea of social prescribing. Do you see that in action? Are there opportunities to do more in that area?

Alison Reeves: We definitely see opportunities. We have a lot of resources and support for our members who want to start thinking about social prescribing. I notice that the community links officers who would be fundamental to that process are only just getting started in those roles. They have just had their first conference—I think it was last week. They are really only getting to grips with what that means. They will be fundamental to making social prescribing work, because they need to understand and have a complex knowledge of all the possible leisure activities in their areas. When that network is stronger, we can start to talk to them about how to find out about music groups in the area. We have our find-a-group tool, which anyone can use.

10:15

Community links workers will be crucial in that role. The idea is that, if a community links officer heard a patient say to them, "Oh, I used to be in a choir and I loved it," they could simply point them to our groups. We do not think that we would need additional support to welcome most of the people who would come through to our groups from social prescribing. If the community links officer gave enough information to the group that was receiving that person, that would probably be enough, so we are not particularly concerned about needing extra financial resources. However, the community links officers will need to have a complex understanding of the whole offer and not just look immediately for, for example, arts and health projects or professional arts organisations. They need to know that volunteer-led arts activity is a great place for social prescribing.

Sarah Latto: Social prescribing is a really interesting concept. We have been thinking about prescribing volunteering activity, given its health and wellbeing benefits.

One consideration—it is not a concern; it is a consideration—is the fact that, if somebody who has additional support needs is prescribed volunteering activity, it is important that the organisations that take that person on as a volunteer have the capacity to respond to those support needs. That goes back to the point about inclusive volunteering, and it probably also carries across to inclusive cultural participation. Accessibility is vital and, often, additional resource is required to make the necessary changes to support it.

There are definitely real opportunities in social prescribing. However, that goes back to Alison Reeves's point about the need for the community links workers to understand the complexity and to know where it would be best to refer people to.

Jemma Neville: I am wary about social prescribing and placing too many expectations on the voluntary and community sector to pick up shortfalls in our in-crisis national health service. Many general practitioners have concerns about it as well. There are good examples of where it works, but there needs to be proper hosting support for groups. In addition, creative or cultural groups should not be seen as somehow providing a quick fix, because that is to misunderstand their nature.

Your peers in the all-party parliamentary group on arts, health and wellbeing at Westminster have done some work in collecting information about the many benefits of taking part in creative and cultural activity, but also about where social prescribing does not work. Let us not make blanket assumptions about it.

The Convener: In my area, we have Lanarkshire Association for Mental Health. The one venue that is open for free-to-access crafting, music lessons, art classes and knitting is the premises that LAMH's mental health cafe has taken on, which are an old cinema in our area. It is interesting to see how a charity that is not an arts

charity could help and support your organisations. Those are interesting comments.

Alasdair Allan: The committee has talked a lot about the concept of social prescribing. In your last comments, Jemma Neville, you seemed to say that social prescribing works if you point people in the direction of something that they are already good at or interested in, which makes sense. If somebody goes to the doctor and says that they might be suffering from isolation but are good at singing, you point them in the direction of a choir.

I am putting words in your mouth. Are you saying that, rather than just directing people to go off and do something cultural, we have to find out what they are interested in and direct them to something that they are likely to want to do? That is not simple to do.

Jemma Neville: Yes. The places in which that conversation happens are important, because none of us likes to be given medical labels and be told that we need to have art done to us or that it will make us better. I am oversimplifying for effect. However, it is not the job of voluntary arts groups to pick up the shortfalls.

There could be better signposting. That is part of the current shortfall in mapping what is available. There could also be support for groups to be more welcoming and inclusive. Often, by their nature, groups consist of like-minded people who want to share their passion and who need to attract new members but do not always know how to go about doing so.

The Convener: As there are no further questions from members, I thank the witnesses for their contributions this morning, which will be helpful to our inquiry, and their written submissions, which were well received by all the committee members. We still have quite a few evidence sessions to go in the inquiry, and I am sure that we will have some reflections when our report comes out. I hope that the witnesses will be able to take part in the launch when it happens.

We now move into private session.

10:21

Meeting continued in private until 10:34.

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