

CBA Community Heritage Groups in Wales Executive Summary

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Project summary

In 2020, the CBA successfully applied for funding from the Welsh Government's Cultural Recovery Fund, in order to establish the status of community heritage groups in Wales and devise a strategy to support and promote them. This research was conducted by the Clwyd Powys Archaeological Trust (CPAT) on behalf of the CBA, in late 2020 and early 2021.

Methodology

The initial stage of the project was an audit of existing community heritage groups, looking at data from previous surveys and combing online directories and links to clubs and societies across Wales, including ones covering local history, community museums, local archives, Welsh cultural heritage, building preservation trusts, and historic landscape partnerships.

This audit found there is in the region of 420 confirmed active societies and groups under the broad umbrella of "community heritage" across Wales, and approximately a further 180 whose status could not be confirmed due to difficulties in communication or a lack of up to date contact details. Approximately 74 groups were presumed active due to references in local media, social media, or other sources, but did not respond to any attempts to contact or contact details could not be ascertained.

These 420 groups represents a significant reduction from the over 700 such societies that existed at the time of previous auditing by the Welsh Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA) in 2014, highlighting the urgency of action to ensure the survival of the remaining groups.

The secondary phase of the project conducted a survey of these societies, through email, telephone call, and letter writing, to ascertain if they were still active, how Covid-19 had impacted them and their memberships, and what kind of support they would need to survive and thrive. 62 societies responded to this survey, representing c.10% of all groups and c.15% of known active groups.

Survey questions included:

- How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected your usual programme of events or activities?
- What are your biggest challenges following the Covid-19 pandemic?
- What resources, advice, or guidance would you need in future or after Covid-19 to help run your group, club, society or organisation?

The final phase was the drafting of a list of recommendations to tackle the issues raised in the audit and survey. These recommendations were followed by the creation and adaptation of initial collection of resources for the community heritage hub, prioritising those most urgently required by the groups.

Headline results

Of the respondents to the survey:

- 50% were local history societies, and the majority of groups identified their main expertise or focus as local and social history. There was also strong representation from local museums and industrial heritage.
- Over 50% had ceased activities entirely due to the impact of the Covid-19 epidemic.
- Only 18 of the 62 groups had some online activities such as Zoom sessions, and there was an awareness that online meetings did not have the social and wellbeing benefits of in-person ones. There was a lack of confidence in digital methodologies and the use of the internet more broadly.
- The most prominent causes for concern in the wake of Covid-19 were recruiting and retaining volunteers or members (with the largest concern being recruiting younger members, with almost 40% stating they were concerned at their “ageing” membership and executive with no-one to replace them - and recruiting those with the necessary skills to enable the groups to develop an online or digital presence), and the loss of usual venues for hosting their regular events and programming.
- Around 70% of groups stated that they would need further resources or guidance to survive post Covid-19, and over half of these groups identified that they most needed help with recruiting volunteers and creating digital resources.

Recommendations

In response to these findings, CPAT made a suite of recommendations:

- That the database of community heritage groups be maintained and regular contact kept to ensure they are still operating, and that the database be accessible to the public / relevant bodies and organisations so that the groups are visible, accessible, and can gain new members or volunteers.
- That an online “hub” of resources be created so that community heritage groups could access quality checked, reliable resources and guidance to tackle the key issues they face
- That a programme of training be devised and delivered by the CBA to focus upon the recurring issues highlighted by survey responses
- That a dedicated community heritage liaison post be created for Wales, and act as a model for a similar role in other CBA regions.