



## Valleys Kids- Equality at our Heart

Strategic Arts Equality Plan 2025-2026

Arts Council of Wales

November 2025



‘... truly inspirational and ambitious. It demonstrates best practice in all aspects of its work’

Valleys Kids – UK winner  
British Urban Regeneration Association Award

‘Not only has being involved with Valleys Kids changed my life it has changed my family’s life’

Service User.

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## Introduction and Context

*“The inequality which dominates the landscape is socio-economic, not least because of the scale of its impact, the breadth of its influence and the depth of the inequalities created. Across the board, people from lower socio-economic groups do not, on average, enjoy the same quality of life as people from higher socio-economic groups.”*

Fairer Wales: Equality, human rights and good relations (March 2011)

Inequality in the Valleys is not about individual failings but about historical and structural factors—industrial collapse, economic policy, and long-term neglect. These forces, created by entrenched unemployment and deprivation, still shape life in the region today. The disparities are rooted in broader social conditions— income, quality of life, life expectancy, health outcomes, education, housing, and community environment.

### Roots in the Community

This year Valleys Kids were delighted to receive a small uplift in funding through the Investment Review. This has enabled us to continue growing our Sparc provision (representing 80% of the portfolio work) but also to develop our schools programme and our visual arts programme with our Artist in Residence, creating bespoke work with older adults which increasingly has a community focus on tackling isolation and loneliness..

Sparc is the youth arts provision for Valleys Kids and has been in operation since 1998. Francois Matarasso in ‘A Restless Art’ (2019) describes how the arts functions as an integral part of Valleys Kids “participatory arts running through it like the letters in a stick of rock” (2019, p.161). We create a supportive environment for everyone. By developing relationships with the young people, families and older adults, members of the community access our work across generations.

Key to our work is collaborative practice with local, national and international partners that enable young people, older people, emerging artists and families to access a rich variety of opportunities. This includes Welsh Language work, working with Disabled, LGBTQ+ & Global Majority artists and organisations to ensure people from predominantly lower socio-economic backgrounds have a rich and diverse experience which meets their needs. Alongside the Family team at Valleys Kids,

We support a trauma informed approach to the work. Inclusivity at its Heart  
Our arts plan has inclusivity at its heart. We recognise that we live in an increasingly unequal society and this is most apparent in the South Wales Valleys where we have some of the poorest communities in Europe. Socio-economic inequality remains the scourge of our current society as

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evidenced in the 'Fairer Wales' report in 2011 and subsequent findings from research after the Global Pandemic.

*"Covid deepened poverty for those already living in deprivation and widened gaps in income, housing, and digital access. 24% of Welsh households saw income reductions, with 11% reporting their income fell "a lot."*

WCPP Policy Briefing (2022)

Valleys Kids work takes place exclusively in disadvantaged areas Our organisation is deeply embedded in the fabric of the lives of local people, highly respected and trusted by all sections of our community.

Valleys Kids and Sparc deliver key services in communities throughout Rhondda Cynon Taff , which is amongst the top 10% most deprived communities in Wales. In these areas, Valleys Kids operate from a position of strength with over 40 years experience of innovative community development initiatives working with disadvantaged individuals and families. The economic climate is causing devastating effects on these already poor communities particularly with the introduction of Universal Credits with families spiralling into debt. The recent pandemic, cost of living rises and spiralling fuel costs have only served to highlight these structural inequalities.

*"The South Wales Valleys show inequality across a range of health, wellbeing and education indicators".*

*Our Valleys, Our Future (2017)*

Despite being in the top 10% of Most Deprived Wards, RCT receives only £4.35 per capita for the arts as opposed to Cardiff where the spend is nearly £30 per head. We will continue to lobby for additional funding for the South Wales Valleys particularly when the work is of an excellent standard and quality. The value for money offered by Valleys Kids is second to none.

## Our Approach

Our approach is working alongside local communities and supporting them to reach their potential. This is embedded in our governance arrangements. In order to be a member of our trustee Board, you must have actively volunteered in our communities and demonstrated a direct commitment to the work. This enables us to include local men and women on our Board who contribute directly to our communities; most of them live and work here. Our Board Members have experience across the public sector (including health, , social services and the arts), the private sector and the third sector (including social enterprises and community development. Five years ago young people joined our board as trustees (one as an apprentice); both of them worked extensively with Sparc. What our Board shares first and foremost is a commitment to equality and to ensuring that the most disadvantaged and vulnerable people in our communities are placed at the heart of our work.

Jason Camilleri who heads up the Creative Learning team at the Wales Millennium Centre is on our Board. He has a longstanding relationship with Valleys Kids, previously volunteering his time for the organisation. He has worked with Sparc through the 'Together Stronger' partnership which is now in its 7th year.

Our Director of Arts (formerly Artistic Director of Sparc) has recently completed the 'Culture Change' programme funded by the Welsh Government and working alongside all the National companies in Wales, to work towards a more inclusive and diverse arts portfolio in Wales. One of

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the key goals in the Welsh Government's action plan is to establish Wales as a foremost anti racist nation in 2025; this programme directly feeds into that process.

### Working with People with Protected Characteristics

We are fully conversant with the Equalities Act 2010, which legally protects people from discrimination in the workplace, assists with equality of opportunity and helps to foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic with those who don't.

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/85019/equality-duty.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/85019/equality-duty.pdf)

We agree with the analysis presented by the 'Fairer Wales' report (2011) that, in ensuring equality for our communities, we must look at the inter-relationship between poverty and the position of people from protected groups to ensure that no-one is excluded from our practice.

*"It is not sufficient to focus on lower socio-economic groups without recognising that the position of women and men, white and ethnic minority, and disabled and non-disabled people may be very different within them. Similarly, it is not sufficient to focus solely on protected groups, irrespective of their socio-economic circumstances."*

Fairer Wales: Equality, human rights and good relations (March 2011)

## Innovative Practices- Opening up New Conversations

Sparc focuses predominantly on work with young people but, within that remit, we are acutely aware of issues relating to people of all ages, gender, disability, race, religious beliefs and the needs of global majority individuals in our communities. With the inclusion of our visual arts portfolio, the Artist in Residence has greater opportunities to develop her work with older adults and in particular to tackle social isolation and loneliness.

The South Wales Valleys is a largely white working class area with a remarkable history of Internationalism now changed to a post- industrial area where many of those links have been severed. Whilst the demographic of Rhondda Cynon Taff is changing, there is still a lack of direct access to other cultures. Too often perceptions are formed via media (in particular social media) which highlights the negative aspects of issues such as immigration and religion. This can help foster racism and xenophobia, especially when communities are feeling beleaguered and forgotten. This has been highlighted most recently in the re-emergence of the far right in South Wales Valleys Communities. The 'Black Lives Matters' Campaign has highlighted for everyone the need to re-examine all aspects of our working practice and to ensure that we are making every effort to tackle racism and inequality. Similarly, the #WeShallNotBeRemoved campaign for disabled artists and participants has encouraged us to focus on ensuring greater access for disabled artists and participants. Both campaigns have cautioned against a 'tick box' approach to equality; at Valleys Kids we are seeking to develop a long term sustained approach to change rather than a quick fix.

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Sparc always set its work in an international context and young people and staff from the project have visited Botswana, Jordan, Spain, Catalonia and more recently South Africa, Poland, Hungary, New Zealand, Hong Kong and Germany.

The young people, older adults and staff have met young people from other deprived communities in the townships of South Africa, the refugee camps of Georgia and street children from Poland. More recently, through our 'Mind the Gap' project emerging artists from Sparc exchanged with emerging artists from Luebeck in Germany working in post-industrial communities to develop shared practice and learning.

Our Artist in Residence runs a highly inclusive gallery space creating opportunities for work with LGBTQ+ artists, neuro-diverse artists and continuing to support local artists from working class and lower socio-economic backgrounds. Through a close association with the Friends of Artes Mundi Programme (FOAM), she works to enable international artists to work with local people in the Valleys in situ and also supports our participants to visit high profile gallery spaces where they can engage with global majority artists. This has been a huge learning experience for our older adults and communities.

The opportunities brokered through relationships with other organisations have a huge impact on the art group participants. Meeting and working with diverse groups of people through visiting exhibitions and attending workshops has been a real learning experience for our older adults and communities. It brings the wider world into the Rhondda Valleys, providing the opportunity to learn about the many genres of art, leading to discussions around the unique work of global majority artists.

For young people at Sparc, this international and national work has affected radically every aspect of their lives changing their perspective on poverty, their eating habits and their views on the world. A parent explains this change in attitude since her daughter visited Poland:

*"Before she was so picky and fussy and she'd check the date on everything... [after Poland] she'd come home and just like, "ah that's all fine I'm alright with that". It's changed her so much, it's great."*

*Ballin (2019)*

This in turn helps us to foster an open and supportive environment where young people are far more accepting of young people from global majority backgrounds and cultures because of their experiences.

Through our Together Stronger partnership with the Wales Millennium Centre, the young people have connected with a diverse group of young people in Cardiff from Riverside, Butetown and Fairwater, making and creating work together. The partnership also enables us to make and create work with Black artists like Tumi Williams, Tia Zakura, and Lily Webbe .

## A Needs Led Approach

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The nature of Valleys Kids arts programme means we build long-term lasting relationships and we encourage an atmosphere that is non-judgmental and supportive. Participants, parents, educators and health workers in all aspects of our work have commented on this time and again. We continually evaluate how to improve access and inclusion and strive to include participants and audiences from all walks of life in our artistic practice.

In Sparc we work at the pace and behest of the young people and develop our work accordingly. In this way, for example, Flight Wings has organically developed into an integrated group with an unprecedented number of young disabled people attending.

The Artist in Residence has worked in local communities for many years, developing long standing relationships with individual groups. Creating an inclusive space for adults of all ages, backgrounds and abilities ensures everyone feels welcome to join the art groups; they are always encouraged to return even after long absences. Art group participants range in age from 21 to 94. Ensuring that all sessions are inclusive, individual needs are accommodated for those participants requiring extra support to be creative.

The Artist in Residence works in a variety of mediums building on her years of experience, introducing new techniques and materials to those attending the sessions, giving them the chance to try something new in a non-judgemental environment. As materials are provided so that cost does not become a barrier for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Many art group members have been attending the classes for over a decade. There is no pressure to attend sessions and some dip in and out over the years because of personal and family issues and often ill health. The sessions are geared to reassure people that the doors are always open should they wish to re-join classes when the time suits them. Message groups are also created so that individuals can keep updated; they are free to respond or just read as they wish.

In Sparc, our work is developed and created by the young people and is entirely responsive to them. Sometimes this means the work has to be very targeted and bespoke. For example, our creative writing group Pencil Breakers describes itself as a queer, disabled activist group; intersectionality is highly important here.

Some of the participants involved have chronic illnesses which means working mostly online and in a highly individual way. For many of our Flight Wings and Pencil Breaker participants, this is the only time they have contact with people outside the family.

It is this attentiveness that enables young people with protected characteristics to feel supported and to take the lead in developing practice that suits their requirements/ Our resources are allocated to support this in an integrated way.

We work with young people who often display highly challenging behaviour by virtue of their specific disability, mental health problems or family circumstances. In many instances, the young people we work with have been excluded from other provisions and parents have been turned away by organisations that do not feel equipped to meet the needs of their children. *"I feel comfortable leaving him here and walking away knowing he's being looked after. With other companies I would never, ever do that. I wouldn't." She describes the impact on her child, "it's been a life saver for him, it has".*

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At the sharp end of our work increasing numbers of the young people now have formal education, health and care plans because of diagnoses such as ADHD and Aspergers or identify as neuro-diverse. Many suffer from stress, anxiety and depression. Some of our young people are care experienced or young carers; coming to our provision enables them to focus on themselves rather than being labelled with social and behavioural conditions or problems. During the pandemic, an increasing number of young people have either attempted suicide or witnessed suicide directly in their families. Some of these children are under the age of ten - it is challenging and important work. Increasingly, these young people are struggling to attend school, which causes added pressure for parents and generates conflict and anxiety. Young people and families who attend Sparc are offered additional support through our mentoring programme, sometimes to get young people into early college placements or to support home schooling.

We understand that young people must be supported to attend our work and that we are the ones who need to be flexible and to change in order to meet their needs. Led by our Family Team, Valleys Kids is moving to accreditation as a trauma informed organisation. The y team has also delivered trauma informed training to our Make It! partners and to the Wales Millennium Centre, raising awareness of the impact of trauma and how we can make venues and our groups accessible and supportive.

Family and individual poverty continues to grow year on year with the challenges brought by cost of living rises and fuel increases. As an organisation, we continue to prioritise food security. We now have warm hubs, collaborations with the Co-operative and local businesses and strong links with food banks to support our families living in poverty.

Digital poverty is a real issue in the Valleys. Sparc has secured further funding for laptops and Internet cards to enable young people to access the arts in a digital space. The role of our previous Digital Arts worker was crucial in making this transition. This year, we have been able to open up more face-to-face work but we continue to develop online provisions for those who need it.

*"This space is very important, not just for me, but for everyone. It gives us opportunities to be able to talk to people, especially for people who suffer with anxiety, depression or disabilities - it keeps us sane and our feelings whole and warm - it gives us a place to grow as a person."*

As with the younger people of Valleys Kids, the older adults also struggle with illness, some of it chronic. This means they are not always able to attend sessions on a regular basis. As these sessions are often a 'lifeline' for them, time and effort is taken to find ways to enable them to still take part.

As one 94-year-old participant comments; *"this is the only time I get to go out apart from my son taking me to the doctors. I don't know what I would do without the art group, I listen to all the creative things that people are doing and with help from Anne and everyone, I can still make my own art. I can't believe my work has been in three exhibitions this year...who would have thought it!"*

For some, this is the only time they leave their homes that week; the opportunity for a conversation with others they now call friends and to be creative is priceless to them. One participant, a widow of many years with little confidence and family living a distance away, often reminds us that without the art group to attend she would be totally isolated.

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Through additional funding, iPads enables those most socially isolated to participate when they cannot leave the house. If participants are feeling well enough, we connect them via iPad to the session for a remote 'tea break' so that they can see what everyone has been doing and catch up with conversations. Visits are often made to homes to supply art materials and collect work and generally check up on the wellbeing of participants. Seeing a familiar face at the door is sometimes all that is needed to 'make a difference' to someone's otherwise lonely day.

Sparc and the Artist in Residence also work in partnership with our youth and play workers; we are able to offer additional support in sessions where this is required. This has never been explicitly included in our Arts Council funding; it is a commitment offered by Valleys Kids to ensure that all young people can be included in youth arts work if they wish to participate.

## Audience Development

Though diversifying our marketing and engaging with more partners we have seen a much more diverse audience base. This benefits the young people, and we have also seen an increase in families attending shows and sharing the experience of going to the theatre. We have built up our youth membership and run quarterly consultation and practice days with them where we develop our programme collectively. With the support of the Wales Millennium Centre, we were also able to offer community ticket prices; accompanied by the provision of transport, this makes visiting the Centre accessible. *"The most memorable moment for me was having this opportunity, as my first time ever going to Cardiff. Thank you for having me here to perform."*

Artists from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds and disciplines are encouraged to exhibit at the Art in the Attic Gallery, enabling the Artist in Residence to create an eclectic array of exhibitions for the year ahead.

Exhibiting artists are encouraged to share their work with the art groups, talking about their processes and the background behind their subject matter. This is invaluable to the art group members, as they feel confident in asking questions about the work in what they see as 'their space'. Workshops are then delivered, responding to the art that is on display. In their feedback, artists also describe this as an important opportunity for their personal development.

*"I would never have felt confident in talking to an artist if I was ever lucky enough to meet them, but after our 'artist talks' sessions and the workshops with the art group, I really don't mind asking questions now about what the work is about".*

We will place an emphasis on work that is suitable for families, and will continue to develop our 16+ audiences.

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## Increased Access

All the buildings in which Sparc work are accessible for families and disabled participants to perform or to watch events. We also deliver sessions in person and online for young people.

In our Drama Workshops, we are engaging with increasing numbers of children who are neuro-diverse or have ADHD. We run bespoke drama sessions as a core part of the programme. This year, we were delighted to welcome back the Sherman Theatre for a sold out community performance for families.

Visual Art sessions are delivered in buildings that have ease of access for those with limited mobility especially those with more severe disabilities. On occasions, when they feel unable to attend in person, iPads are used to include them to ensure they can still take part in the group session from the comfort of their homes.

At the Factory, the Art in the Attic Gallery is situated in the roof space. As this is an old building, access to the office levels and gallery space was restrictive. We invested in a stair lift to enable those with limited mobility to visit.

We consult with our disabled participants about the ways in which we set up exhibitions and encourage artists to be mindful of how they position their work if it occupies the floor.

For private viewing events, we consult with the artist and, if they are aware of any visitors to their exhibitions who may need access or would rather remain on the ground floor, a live feed can be set up from the gallery via video link and the exhibition shown on a large screen downstairs.

With permission), art pieces are taken from the collection on display for people unable to climb the stairs to get a closer look.

We will continue to develop a programme that supports young and older disabled people, and their families to engage in our work.

## Increased Participation

Since returning to face-to-face work, we have seen a notable uptake in all our regular sessions and our drama workshops and youth membership for 12+ has grown significantly. Currently, it is a struggle to keep up with demand within our resources. We have seen capacity audiences at our events and performances. The high profile work at Wales Millennium Centre attracted new audiences and also encouraged Valleys audiences to venture to Cardiff. Through our work with Make It!, we have engaged with more strategic partners and also grown our base of Sparc Associates and freelancers to extend our work.

We will continue to work towards increased participation and diversification.

## Public Awareness

With the development of our beautiful Valleys Kids website which compliments the bespoke Sparc website, we have much more advanced web and social networking campaigns, more people than before have become aware of the work and the continued success of our arts projects. Valleys Kids social media platforms are now bilingual which allows for more consistent messaging of our work and extends our reach.

The Valleys Kids Arts Plan continues the work of developing a communication strategy and social media strategy. Over four years, our full time Digital Arts Worker upskilled the team. enabling us to create newsletters, blogs, videos and to produce high quality online resources.

We have embraced Social Networking sites to promote our work and to galvanise the feedback from the young people involved in our workshops. Our events have received National and local press coverage, from both Welsh Language and English radio and TV networks, particularly featuring our work at the Wales Millennium Centre. We have built partnerships with Admiral Insurance and Manchester Business School who have supported us in developing our marketing strategy for Valleys Kids, assisting with the production of a regular newsletter reflecting the work of the whole organisation.

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We will continue to increase public engagement, working with local press and social media campaigns and capitalising on the main Valleys Kids organisational profile as well as the bespoke Sparc and Art in the Attic brand. Our young people will be encouraged to create and make content.

## Partnerships

Our close links with the Welsh Government, the ACW and other organisations have enabled us to promote our work at a strategic level. The late Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Lynne Neagle (Education Minister), Emma Wools (Police and Crime Commissioner for Wales), Chris Bryant (MP for Rhondda), Peter Swinburne (Chair of Wales Millennium Centre), Graeme Farrow (Artistic Director of WMC), National Dance Company Wales, 15 partners across Rhondda Cynon Taff and international partners from Luebeck Germany through our Mind the Gap project supporting emerging artists, have all supported our work. We were recently nominated by the Kings Trust as one of three Charities in Rhondda Cynon Taff to work alongside local and national business partners. Their role is to develop an action plan of support for the organisation; this facilitates work placements for young people from disadvantaged areas who otherwise may not have had the opportunity.

We will continue to attract people of influence to our work in order to develop our profile locally, nationally and internationally.

## Planned Project Work 2025 - 2026

### SUPPORTING PEOPLE WITH PROTECTED CHARACTERISTICS

Intended Outcome: To develop further our creative work with people from under-represented backgrounds, low socio-economic groups, LGBTQ+, neurodiverse + POC telling their own stories.

#### Working with Disabled Participants

Flight Wings 16+: Working with Disabled and Neuro-divergent Participants

Flight Wings members are some of the most vulnerable young adults with whom we currently work; a number of the group have disabilities. For most of them, the only time they speak to people outside their families is during the drama sessions. The sessions have provoked deep and

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meaningful conversations and allowed them to talk about their anxieties, thereby giving us a platform to offer support that is much needed. A summertime event for the group is essential. This year they will be able to return for a residential trip to our Centre in the Gower. For some of the group, this is the only time they stay away from the family - so it takes careful planning.

This group is highly creative and experts at improvising and creating new work. They are working currently on their own version of Twelfth Night, supported by Dylan Price who is re-working the script with them. They love the cross -gender casting and intrigue involved; they are naturally drawn to humour. Performing in front of an audience is always a challenge and, particularly for the neuro-diverse members of the group, attempting anything new needs sensitivity and care. We have worked through film, and will try out this new material with a small invited audience.

#### Target:

- 30 sessions
- 1 residential
- 1 film performance
- 1 trip

#### Building and Developing Inclusive Youth Theatres

Our Youth Theatre's involve a high proportion of participants who are from disadvantaged backgrounds, some care experienced, some who are neuro-diverse, others disabled. Young people living in poverty are experiencing increased challenges. 16+ participants often live away from parents or are sofa surfing, struggling with hunger & lack of access to basic hygiene products, along with little or no access to transport. To ensure our sessions remain accessible, we have provided basic meals, access to deodorants/shower gel and assist with transport.

By creating a highly inclusive space where young people lead, collaborate and design their own work and productions supported by highly trained professional workers, it is our experience that we attract a high proportion of young people from diverse and increasingly intersectional backgrounds. Many of our participants identify as queer and disabled.

We run quarterly practical consultation days to further support the young people to create structures and experiences that will support their work. Here they have the opportunity to shape the direction of the programme and provide input into the process. This allows for agency, develops confidence and opportunities for leadership.

We offer regular mentoring support sessions to 16+ participants, assisting with personal matters, careers advice, CV writing, interview techniques, signposting to counselling sessions in our building where this is required or to other relevant services.

This year, we are working in collaboration with the Sherman Theatre, to develop a playwriting course for 16+ participants, focused on developing their ideas and working alongside actors and

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writers from different cultural backgrounds. We continue to offer training through Radio Platform.

Target:

250 mentoring sessions

2 16+ forums/ groups

2 Sparc associate events

30 one to one sessions with Sparc Associates

### Working with LGBTQ+ Participants

Working with Lead Artist – Bethan Marlow

Sparc has always ensured that we create an open, inclusive, safe and supportive environment for LGBTQ+ participants. Often, this is the only place where young people are able to talk through issues that relate to their sexuality and some of the barriers they encounter. We also encourage an environment that celebrates differences and LGBTQ+ events and issues.

Bethan Marlow, who is an advocate for the LGBTQ+ arts community, is a longstanding Sparc Associate and collaborator and takes a lead on this work. Since 2020, Bethan has overseen the Pencil Breakers project - a continuing legacy from our 'Powerful Interventions' commission with the Wales Millennium Centre where, as Lead Artist, she founded the group. The group describe themselves as a collective of queer, disabled and activist writers and choose to write anonymously. The group attend weekly sessions online, some of the artists suffer from chronic fatigue, so that we work at a pace that suits everyone and ensure we remain highly inclusive.

Pencil Breaker's work profiling Queer, Disabled and Activist voices was performed at the Eisteddfod for the first time. Directed by Bethan Marlow, professional neurodivergent artist Menna Rogers, alongside Deborah Newton-Williams performed their creative pieces in the Paned o De tent. After the session, our most long-standing trans, disabled member did a Q&A about the work.

Sgwennu Radical

This was such a successful intervention. It sparked a deeper conversation with the participants and artists involved in the Eisteddfod about the need for a space for writers in Rhondda Cynon Taff who want to develop their Welsh Language writing. This has generated a new project, led by Bethan Marlow: Sgwennu Radical enables perspectives to emerge from queer, disabled, neuro diverse, activist, Welsh language writers .

The first iteration was a collaboration with Mess up the Mess and Queertawe in Swansea. We were invited to contribute to their Festival and presented 'Whispering Teacups' an installation made up of short pieces that were English, Welsh and bilingual. Audience members were invited to join a tea party, where they could pick up the teacups and listen to pieces described by their 'tea quality' whether smoky and aromatic or strong and tangy. The weekly Pencil Breakers

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sessions are always bilingual but the opportunity for additional sessions solely in Welsh has allowed for new voices to emerge.

Output: Development of Sgwennu Radical working with Queer, Disabled and Activist Artists to enhance #and develop their work and share with audiences amplifying their voice and creative talent.

Target:

28 sessions

100 attendances

1 Scratch performance night – featuring queer, disabled and activist voices.

4 Events – to profile and amplify the voices of this group.

### Working Collaboratively with Global Majority Participants

#### Together Stronger Partnership with Wales Millennium Centre

We are into our seventh year of the Together Stronger partnership. This year, after a searching consultation led by Emma Evans who is the Head of Creative Experiences at the Wales Millennium Centre, we re-imagined and focused on the key areas where we can best support each other and where our work intersects.

We recognise that our shared ethos underpinning work with young people lies at the heart of this partnership and that our desire is to strengthen inclusion and diversity at every level of our work. This includes arranging termly joint meetings between our teams where we can shape and develop projects collectively, and sharing the learning from them. We are especially interested in how we continue to bring together young people from different racial and cultural backgrounds so that they can learn and explore in a conducive environment.

#### Radio Platform

Radio Platform in Porth, part of the Together Stronger partnership with Wales Millennium Centre, continues to thrive and develop. The station is youth led and this year we won a silver medal at the prestigious Arias awards. There is a shared recognition that the Porth station needs a different approach from the Centre in Cardiff, particularly because a high proportion of the young people attending are neuro-divergent and learning disabled. We employ an additional support worker who is always on hand for one-to-one support and for meeting the needs of the group. This year, for the first time, we have a new wonderful trans Co-ordinator who is local to Rhondda Cynon Taff.

Output: To influence the way major national organisations like National Gallery, Wales Millennium Centre, National Dance Company Wales and Artes Mundi work with communities and young people.

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Target:

- 4 joint creative team days
- 4 executive meetings with youth representation
- 3 youth consultations days
- 1 youth residency with youth collective
- 1 training day to share practice with external agencies

Output: Residentials and workshops to explore cross themes, to learn from each others' artform and to share stories and experiences between young people from Next Up Academy + Penygraig Youth Theatre.

Target:

- Weekend residential at Dros Nos in WMC, to share creative work.
- Planned summer residential working towards a joint production in April 2026 including both Penygraig and Penygraig Youth Theatres with members of Next Up Academy .
- 2 joint events
- 4 joint workshops (emerging artist led)
- 4 taster workshops (led by POC Artists)
- 35 participants

Work in Penrhys

In Penrhys, because the area and estate is changing all the time, we are working increasingly with young people from a Global Majority background including those who have lived experience as refugees and asylum seekers. Kyle and Ryan Stead, both amazing Sparc Associates, lead on this work for Sparc. Kyle is also one of the lead artists delivering on Above and Beyond, a multi-partnership project led by National Dance Company Wales. He has identified the need for more representation from Global Majority Artists with a passion for this work, to work in partnership on the project and to connect the young people with the opportunities available through the Together Stronger partnership.

Output: Development of the Above and Beyond partnership with the National Dance Company Wales and partners in Penrhys alongside drama based intervention led by Penrhys born artists + Sparc associate Kyle Stead.

Target:

30 sessions

1 joint residency

2 performance platforms

2 external workshops

1 residency

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## Intergenerational Work with Older Adults

Schools and colleges often approach the Artist in Residence seeking placements for their students. This is one of the many ways in which we find opportunities for young people and the older adults in the art groups to work intergenerationally.

School pupils shadow the Artist in Residence during their placement week. They are primed and supported to find an easy art session idea that can be used with the art groups that week. Their ideas are often something we have not considered doing before and, because the groups are very receptive to trying new things, these sessions are greeted with enthusiasm and enjoyment.

We have established links with local schools; each year a space is kept for them to exhibit at the gallery. Through this and working with the teaching staff, we have opportunities to create bespoke art sessions that can be led by the younger people.

This year Global majority artist, Cara Walker, is on a student placement working with the older adult group to develop portraits, her specialist area.

The Artist in Residence regards collaboration as key to her practice. This year, she will work with the National Gallery as part of their celebratory 200 year Road Trip, alongside artists from different cultural backgrounds, running sessions with older adults, school children and members of the community. She and queer artist, Rhys Slade Jones, will be undertaking a joint enterprise. The AIR continues to seek opportunities for strengthening existing relationships and for working with new artists.

Output: strategic meetings with key collaborators to build long term partnerships to sustain visual arts portfolio and widen opportunities and engagement with the arts.

Target: 3 strategic meetings with National Gallery, Artes Mundi 11, g39.

Output: Building on established relationships, the Artist in Residence will work with artists from under-represented backgrounds, with a particular emphasis on working with queer artists in conversations with Caitlin Flood Molyneux and Rhys Slade-Jones.

We want to create work with older adults responding to themes and topics arising from a series of workshops.

Target:

- 4 workshops with 2 queer artists
- 25 participants.

## Joint Work with the Family Team & Soar Centre

Sparc works closely with the Family Team at Valleys Kids who lead the way in developing trauma informed, inclusive practice. Through our shared approach we have not only provided sessions for parents of neuro-diverse children and young people but also supported parents with

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significant issues in their life (including dealing with domestic violence, having children in care and those living in poverty).

### Accessible Performances and Events

Sparc provides a high quality programme of affordable arts events for our young people, families and members of local communities; this includes, dance, theatre, music, film and visual and contemporary arts exhibitions and happenings. Young people assist with all aspects of running the event such as programming, marketing, fundraising, hosting, technical support and Front of House.

We work in communities and with families who are living in areas which are economically deprived and experience severe disadvantages. Accessing any arts provision for these families can sometimes feel impossible. We often work with large families so the cost of attending events can be entirely prohibitive. Sparc have actively campaigned with the Arts Council and the Night Out Scheme to subsidise the ticket prices to all of our events, thereby removing one of the many barriers our families face.

Through our Together Stronger partnership with the Wales Millennium Centre, people in our Community and Family hubs have been able to access reduced tickets and transport to visit the Centre - with the majority attending for the first time. Young people from the steering group have also worked as consultants offering suggestions about how the centre can be more user friendly for young people. They have representation on the youth collective and are supporting development of the Platform spaces. Valleys Kids are looking to become an accredited trauma informed organisation leading the way in supporting access to our work for everyone.

Another barrier our families face is transport. We often run coaches and minibuses across our communities to increase access and participation within our work and to our shows and events. This not only helps people who could not afford to access our work but it helps our members for whom public transport is not an option.

Since Sparc moved back to our Soar Centre home this year, we have continued to develop family friendly programming together with staff working in the local community. This includes introducing productions 'Blaid' by Flossy and Boo. In the autumn we will see the return of the Sherman Theatre and the Frog Prince and a collaboration with Hijinx and YMA for 'Meet Fred'. By creating relaxed inclusive performance spaces we can introduce both parents and children to theatre, often for the first time.

## Expected Impact from Targets to Address Equality And Inclusion

Below is a list of the expected impact of work to encourage diversity and to foster inclusion in participation/attendance.

- We reach some of the most deprived communities in South Wales and successfully engage them in arts and participation.
- We reach new audiences by engaging communities in the planning and delivery of our services, particularly the young people we work with.
- Young people and our communities feel confident to engage in the arts locally and so they are happy to go on theatre and arts trips further afield.
- Sparc provides sustainable engagement, supporting communities and young people to be able to participate in a high quality arts programme.
- We enable young people to develop a culture of interest around arts engagement, they become used to being an active audience and attend arts events independently.
- Young people involved in Sparc make and create their own work and by doing so they discover their own identities and futures.
- Through developing long-term relationships with arts organisations and production companies, young people have access to pathways and further training.
- Arts organisations benefit from an understanding and recognition of how to successfully work in disadvantaged communities.
- Young people develop digital making skills, increasing their knowledge of digital technology and reaching a wider audience for their stories and artistic practice.
- Through partnership work with Together Stronger, we increase opportunities in the arts for young people from the Valleys.
- Through our work with Together Stronger, young people from the Valleys and young people from Cardiff are able to make and create work together and share ideas and issues that affect their lives.
- Through Sky High, Sparc will reach a wider and more diverse audience who will develop a shared understanding of our work.
- Through our Sparc + programme, young people will have access to pathways in the creative industry and work opportunities, developing skills and confidence which will enable them to be prepared and ready for work.
- Sparc ensures an inclusive environment which actively encourages diversity. We work with partner organisations to develop our reach for young people with protected characteristics.
- Through the development of our Welsh language strategy, Sparc will engage our audiences bilingually and through the language of their choice.
- Older adults develop confidence and combat isolation and loneliness through the development of regular arts sessions and creating and making their own work with the Artist in Residence.

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- Local, emerging, national and international artists get the opportunity to curate, display and develop their work in a professional gallery supported by an experienced Artist in Residence from Valleys Kids.

## Accessing Job and Opportunities

### SUPPORTING LOCAL PEOPLE INTO WORK

Valleys Kids are mindful of the need to ensure that jobs and opportunities are available to the widest possible community. We work in areas with over 40% unemployment and economic inactivity and we do everything to encourage local people to participate in our work.

Young people who volunteer through the programme are given the opportunity to apply for apprenticeships and to become Sparc Associates. To develop capacity, we encourage Peer Led Projects . This approach has been hugely successful as local people in our communities begin to recognise that the arts is a legitimate career path. It has also increased the diversity of our workforce, enabling us to employ LGBTQ+ & Global Majority artists who have brought their expertise and knowledge to the table.

The skills that young people acquire through this work increases self-confidence; teamwork, increased communication skills and the confidence to present their work publicly. All these skills are transferable.

To enable the widest possible access to jobs and opportunities, we ensure that our work is advertised nationally through networks such as, CWYVS, Youth Cymru and local authority Cultural Services and with our 15 partners from Make It! t. We make full use of social media but we also advertise in the local press, as we are aware that some sections of our communities have limited access to the Internet.

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## Areas for Development

We actively encourage greater diversity in our work place. However, Global Majority representation in the organisation is low, attributable in part to the demographic make up of the area - but this too is changing. Through our participation in the Culture Change Programme, we are working with Inclusive Employers (who are experts in this field) to create an action plan for the whole of Valleys Kids which will improve support and increase representation. Guiding this approach is the anti-racist toolkit, designed to support the programme and assist with the Welsh Government target for Wales to be an anti-racist nation by 2030.

Sparc continues to ensure clear representation in marketing and publicity material to help make our work more attractive to Global Majority Youth Arts Workers.

## Breakdown of Board Representation

In order to become a Board member for Valleys Kids, you must have volunteered or significantly contributed to the work of Valleys Kids previously. In this way, we are able to recruit local people to our Board who have a wide range of expertise and who are willing to give a lasting and meaningful contribution to the overall development of Valleys Kids. This form of governance has been hugely successful and enabled a bottom up approach to governance; wherever possible, where local people are the decision makers. The Arts Council of Wales has requested a review of this approach. In response, the Board prepared an explanatory paper for our funders and recently held an Away Day to look at how the Board was working and to discuss a more sustainable future for Valleys Kids.

On our Board we currently have: .

- six women and four men. Ages range from twenty- five to over sixty.
- One Black member.
- Two Welsh Speakers and a number of learners.
- Two young adult trustees, one of whom is an apprentice.



## Breakdown of Sparc Staff Representation

- We currently have 3 full time members of staff working for Sparc. All of them live and work in Rhondda Cynon Taff. 2 were former beneficiaries of Valleys Kids.
- The age of our team ranges from 28 to 62. .
- We employ our Sparc Associates on a freelance basis
- We have Global Majority, LGBTQ+i, and Welsh Speaking Sparc Associates.
- Sparc works with youth volunteers, offers school and University placements.

## Monitoring and Measuring the Plan

- We have a Valleys Kids Art Board that meets quarterly and has been in operation since 2023.. The Chair of Valleys Kids also chairs the Valleys Kids Art Board, ensuring continuity, and bringing any key issues to the attention of the trustees.
- The Valleys Kids Art Board is administered and overseen by the Director of Arts (formerly the Artistic Director of Sparc).
- All actions outlined in the plan will be reviewed alongside our strategic targets at the VK Arts Board.
- The new Management team (including the Director of Arts) are responsible for the Valleys Kids Board's representation. It will monitor the progress of improved representation on our Board on a yearly basis when the Board Members are up for reappointment.
- Our Business Plan explains how we will make our work more attractive to fluent Welsh speakers and learners, Global Majority and LGBTQ+i staff and participants. We will monitor progress through our discussions with key stakeholders and, most importantly, with our participants and we will continue to evaluate the process.

Our Business Plan, submitted in March 2023 and updated yearly, has a yearly action plan which reflects the Welsh Language Plan and also highlights the key issues that will need to be acted upon in the forthcoming year.

