The Mental Health Arts Festival (MHAF) took place in venues across Wales during October and November 2016. Under the banner ‘Walls:Muriau’ the festival explored the barriers to participation in the arts, both physical and attitudinal that exist for those experiencing mental illness.

The Volunteering Spirit Wales (VSW) pilot supported a four day event held as part of the festival, at Wales Millennium Centre (WMC). The main delivery organisation was Disability Arts Cymru (DAC) whose remit is to promote, support and advocate for Disabled and D/deaf artists.

Volunteering during the event was delivered by Voluntary Arts Wales (VAW), whose aim is to increase access to creative activities.

The Volunteering Spirit Wales (VSW) pilot project aims were to develop methods of volunteer involvement that were informed by best practise particularly in terms of inclusion and equal opportunities. VAW was the only project partner that addressed all five of the project themes 1.

Volunteers support the Mental Health Arts Festival: delivering volunteering in partnership

We were aware that some of those attending might find the content of some of the performances and sessions distressing, so it was important to be prepared to support them if needed.'
The pilot explored working in a partnership where one organisation (DAC) manages the event and another (VAW) manages volunteers. This was the final one of six VSW pilot events to take place, therefore some of the methods used in previous VSW project partner events, such as lanyards and a volunteer hub, were adopted, drawing on the experience of other partners.

VSW aims to increase access to volunteering and to ensure that the quality of the experience, support and follow-up that volunteers receive at events is of a high standard. The project will pass this learning on to event organisers in order to help improve volunteer management at future events.

VSW is funded by Spirit of 2012 and has been delivered in partnership, led by Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA) from 2015 to June 2017. The other five pilot events were carried out in partnership with Partneriaeth Awyr Agored (The Outdoor Partnership), Disability Sports Wales, Run4Wales, National Museum Wales (St Fagans) and Yr Urdd.

OVERVIEW: WHAT DID WE LEARN?

- The partnership approach piloted at this event and the tools and methodologies used here can go a long way to ensuring a good experience for volunteers. There is much to be gained for an organisation in working with a partner that is experienced in volunteer management, from importing of ready-made policies, to a designated person on the staff team who focuses on the well being of volunteers at the event.

- As with all volunteer involvement, planning is paramount, including early involvement of the volunteer management partner, and joint logistics and human resource planning.

- Good practice examples that made a difference to the volunteer experience here included the easy to access information for volunteers on lanyards, pre and post event briefings, confidential disclosure of volunteer support needs prior to the event, the use of a volunteer deployment plan for each day, and word of mouth methods for recruitment.

- Planning and providing for the support of individuals with mental health needs or physical disabilities broadens the accessibility of any event to volunteers. This pilot demonstrated that the provision of things such as a ‘safe/quiet space’ or ‘hub’ and having Mental Health First Aiders on hand, is important even if these are not taken up by the majority of volunteers.
WHAT WE DID, AND HOW IT WORKED

Recruitment and diversity

A role profile for volunteering at the event was developed by the VAW Volunteer Coordinator and Nia Ramage from the VSW project. The selection process was informal. Volunteers were invited to answer several questions by email, and then had a conversation over the phone with the Volunteer Coordinator. All the volunteers recruited at this stage went on to volunteer at the event.

A total of thirteen volunteers were involved in delivering the event across the four day period, with most volunteers doing more than one shift (shifts were either morning, afternoon or evening). Other volunteers were involved in the planning, but this has not been considered as part of the pilot. These volunteers were invited via email to complete a pre and post event survey which was completed by seven and four people respectively.

The Festival was a pay-to-enter event, therefore volunteering did enable people to participate without incurring the cost of a ticket. This is relevant because feedback from volunteers and event organisers at other events suggests that it can be harder to recruit volunteers for free events because this incentive isn’t there. This is reflected in the practice of ‘volunteering for a ticket’ at large music festivals.

VAW was one of several VSW partners that aimed to involve Cardiff Met University students. This, plus targeted recruitment of people interested in mental health/the arts festival, through word of mouth, were the main approaches to recruitment. One Cardiff Met student volunteered at the event.

Several steps were taken in order to make sure that the support needs of people with mental health problems or physical disabilities would be met. To facilitate this, volunteers were invited to complete a support needs questionnaire prior to the event. In a number of instances, this brought support needs to light that the VC was able to accommodate by making small easy changes to the volunteering on the day for those individuals.

Understanding and accommodating individual volunteer motivations was important in providing a good experience. For example, a common motivation for volunteering at the event was a desire to be involved and feel part of the event, without necessarily being a performer:

‘I thought that as a volunteer we would be standing and observing, so it was a pleasant surprise to be able to join in with the sessions’

Frances

Management and communication

VAW provided all of the relevant policies relating to volunteering from their existing documentation. The VC also used tools such as a deployment plan for volunteering that was shared with all staff members.

Two successful tools from other VSW pilots were used here; information lanyards and a volunteer hub. The branded, bilingual lanyards held easy-to-read information and answers to frequently
asked questions, as well as programme details for each day of the festival. They were found to be useful by volunteers, although time consuming for the VC to produce.

The ‘volunteer hub’ provided a safe, quiet space for volunteers in a room behind the scenes, where volunteers could go and have their break if they chose to do so. Tea and coffee making facilities were available and the room was not accessible to the public. This had been trialled successfully by Run4Wales at the Cardiff Marathon, and also at the St Fagans Food Festival. The hub was located some distance from the area in the Millennium Centre where the performances and workshops were taking place. It was not as widely used as the hubs had been at the other pilots, because most volunteers chose to take their breaks where they could still participate in the festival. They did however know it was there if they needed time out:

‘There was a place where we could go for a break and refreshments. I didn’t use it, but it was nice to know that it was there!’

Ellen, student from Cardiff Met

The close working relationship between VAW and DAC and the use of the ‘Deployment Plan’ helped make sure that the volunteering went smoothly. It also enabled flexibility, for example in response to the fact that there were more WMC staff stewards available than expected.

There may be scope to develop this flexibility further at future events, allowing more integration of volunteers into the event management staff team. This would make sure that people feel like they have enough to do:

‘There was sometimes very little that I had to do and I didn’t always feel that I was being very helpful – I had expected that there would be more set tasks to be doing. But the Co-ordinator assured me that I was ‘an extra pair of hands in case anything goes wrong’ and I saw the importance of this’.

Ellen

The Volunteer Coordinator also reflected that part of the learning from the event was that expectations could be managed more in advance next time by being clearer about the ‘being there just in case’ element.

Training and support
Mental Health First Aiders were on hand and the volunteers knew who these were and how to find them if needed.

Staff and volunteers were also offered training before the event on mental health awareness and etiquette in working with people with a mental health illness and disabilities.

Recognition
In events such as this, with small numbers of volunteers, recognition tends to be informal, and based on the close relationship that the Volunteer Coordinator is able to build up with each volunteer. The main form of recognition was saying thank you in person. They also received an email saying ‘thanks’, when the post-event survey was sent out the week after the event.

Volunteers were also offered a certificate to recognise their volunteering, but none chose to take up this offer.

Follow up and referral
At the time of writing, VAW have not formally followed up with the volunteers yet about next year’s Arts Festival and it has not been decided yet if VAW will be involved again as a partner in the festival with DAC.

The Volunteer Coordinator has been contacted by two volunteers since the event and asked to provide references.

SURVEY RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The pre and post event survey responses indicate slight increases in positive perceptions towards disabled people, and in reported likelihood to volunteer at a subsequent event. The small number of respondents (four and seven respectively) does not warrant detailed discussion of the results, because the sample size is not large enough to draw statistically significant conclusions.

Key transferable learning/ summary points

Where a partnership approach is used, the benefits are increased if the volunteer managing organisation is involved as early as possible. The human resource planning for
the event works really well when approached jointly, with staff resource planning done in conjunction with volunteer recruitment planning to make sure that the right number of people are recruited and there is enough (and not too much!) for everyone to do. The learning here is similar to that in the St Fagans pilot, where in effect, the National Museums Wales volunteer department performed the same role for the museum’s events team, as VAW did here for DAC.

Where volunteers are managed by someone other than the overall event manager, there needs to be close working between these members of the team on the day. This was helped at the festival by the use of the Deployment Plan.

Sensitive planning for volunteers with mental ill health can be replicated for events without a specific focus on mental health as part of their remit, in order to make volunteering more accessible. This sort of planning can also make volunteering more accessible for people with other types of vulnerabilities, for example the lanyards were felt to be user friendly for a person using a wheelchair.

 Whilst some accessibility provision, for example a volunteer hub or quiet space, may not always be fully utilised, the fact that volunteers are aware it is there if needed, helps to increase their confidence.

Confidentiality of sensitive information for example regarding support needs is essential. This is particularly important where recruitment has been by word of mouth and staff may know volunteers in other contexts.

This pilot demonstrated the benefits that come from gaining a good understanding of volunteer motivations and support needs, and how it can help lead to a really enjoyable event volunteering experience: valuable to both the individual and the organisation. The type of support needs questionnaire used here could be adapted and scaled up for events with many more volunteers, to ensure that support needs are picked up at events even if there are hundreds of volunteers involved.

**Links to Useful Documents**

- Volunteer deployment plan
- Volunteer role profile
- MHAF Support needs questionnaire

**Links to Related Articles**

- Ellen’s story
- Mental Health Arts Festival – Frances’ story
- Volunteers support the Mental Health Arts Festival

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