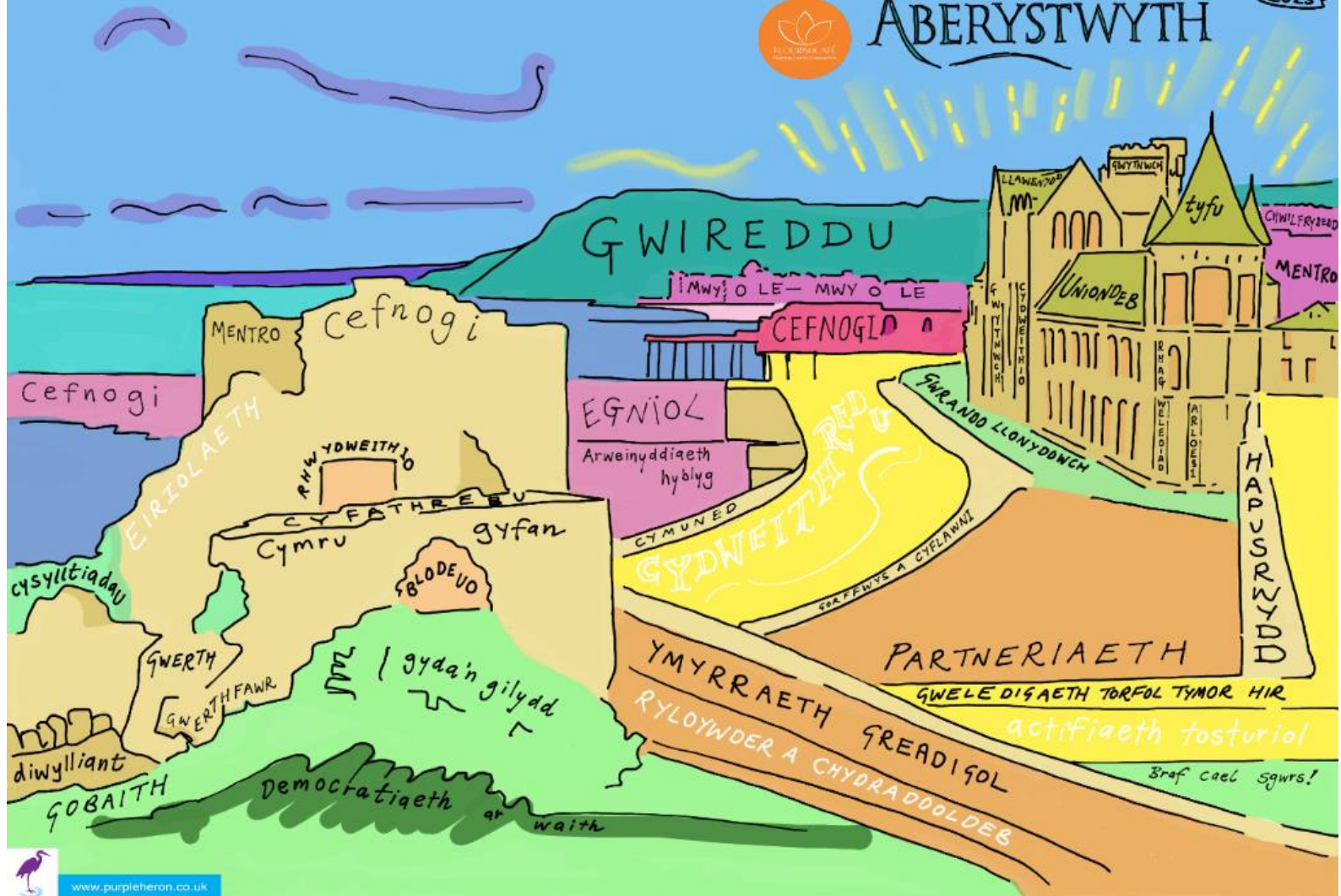


CYMNEDAU CREADIGOL LLEWYRCHUS

JUNE 15 2023



ABERYSTWYTH



Flourishing Creative Communities in Aberystwyth

What Was Heard Report



Canolfan Ddeialog
Dialogue Centre

Executive Summary

On 15 July 2023, 35 members of Aberystwyth creative communities gathered in the Bandstand by the sea to explore how creative entrepreneurs and industries in the area could flourish. Hosted by the Aberystwyth University Dialogue Centre, the event was designed and facilitated by FlourishCafe™.

Attendees included individual artists, photographers, musicians and performers as well as members of the Aberystwyth Rotary, Business Club and staff of arts organisations such as the National Library Wales and Arad Goch Theatre, and Ceredigion Museum. Elected representatives from Aberystwyth Town Council and officers from Ceredigion County Council also attended.

The afternoon included guest speakers Jacob Elis, Lead Change Maker for Public Affairs and International Relations at the Office of the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales and local business owner Julien Shelley. The second half of the event engaged attendees in thinking about what flourishing creative industries in the Aberystwyth areas would look like and some of the current challenges and the opportunities.

Key themes shared by participants:

- *Collaboration*: we should nurture collaboration instead of competition to help each other flourish.
- *Engagement*: policymakers should engage meaningfully with the local community, which means listening and showing that they are listening and acting on co-created, co-designed futures,
- *Support*: for local and circular economy that places arts and culture at the centre.

Discussion points:

Issues: perceptions of detached and unresponsive leadership, short-termist policies and support, and lack of a coherent and compelling vision for Aberystwyth & surrounding area.

Creative disruption – generating ideas for change: taking risks was seen as important because it brings new possibilities, new futures, and new hopes. Although creativity was seen as a privilege, it is a cultural feature that everyone in the community benefits from and so should be better supported.

Flourishing (blooming): The recognition of the importance of flourishing for creative entrepreneurs. This was seen to entail 1) financial security as a foundation 2) health & well-being 3) virtues & character traits including: resilience, autonomy, adaptability, and personal vision.

Practical suggestions: The need for more space for creative pursuits in the Aberystwyth area affordable space is a good investment for economy and the community, rural transport, a 'Human library', integration of Welsh Diaspora into local affairs, mentorship programmes, spaces for dialogue, and co-design of future policies integrating local views meaningfully into local strategies.

Event feedback that can guide future involvement activities:

- Focus public involvement on specific needs and solutions
- Involve Welsh speaking facilitators when engaging the creative industries in mid Wales.
- Value time and money to create efficient agendas and provide compensation for attendees.

This report includes information about the event, more details about discussion themes, and recommendations for future involvement.



Suggested Citation: Aberystwyth University Dialogue Centre 2023. Flourishing Creative Communities in Aberystwyth What Was Heard Report. Aberystwyth University, Aberystwyth, Wales.

About the Event

FlourishCafé™ is a not-for-profit social enterprise and community organisation led by Dr Eri Mountbatten O'Malley. Informed by evidence-based research and theory, the primary goal of FlourishCafé™ is to foster a better understanding of how we can contribute to the flourishing and thriving of everyone within our communities, taking a grassroots perspective. Through various events, FlourishCafé™ acts as a catalyst for dialogues at all levels, be that local, national, or international, to explore what flourishing means for communities and how they can collaborate to realise their visions. These events are thoughtfully designed to encourage communities to slow down and engage in shared sensemaking before taking action.

FlourishCafé™ uses an adapted World Café Method, which is employed in hosting small and large dialogues worldwide. This approach creates welcoming spaces and usually prompts participants to engage in three rounds of questions. Each question is discussed with 3-4 others for 20 minutes, and the subsequent questions build upon the previous ones, guiding the conversation's direction. At the end of the rounds, participants share their insights with the entire group to identify key themes.

During the event on 15 June, participants engaged in the following question rounds:

- What does flourishing mean to you? (personally, communally, socio-politically)
- How can we collectively address the challenges faced by the creative/cultural industry community in Aberystwyth? (Sharing experiences of flourishing through adversity, discussing what worked and what improvements can be made)
- What practical support or tools do you believe are necessary for the creative/cultural industry community in Aberystwyth to thrive? (Considering common values and interests, as well as support from the community, businesses, the Dialogue Centre, and the Local Authority)
- Wild card round / Gallery: Identifying gaps in knowledge or discussions that are important and relevant but have not yet been addressed.

Aberystwyth University Dialogue Centre

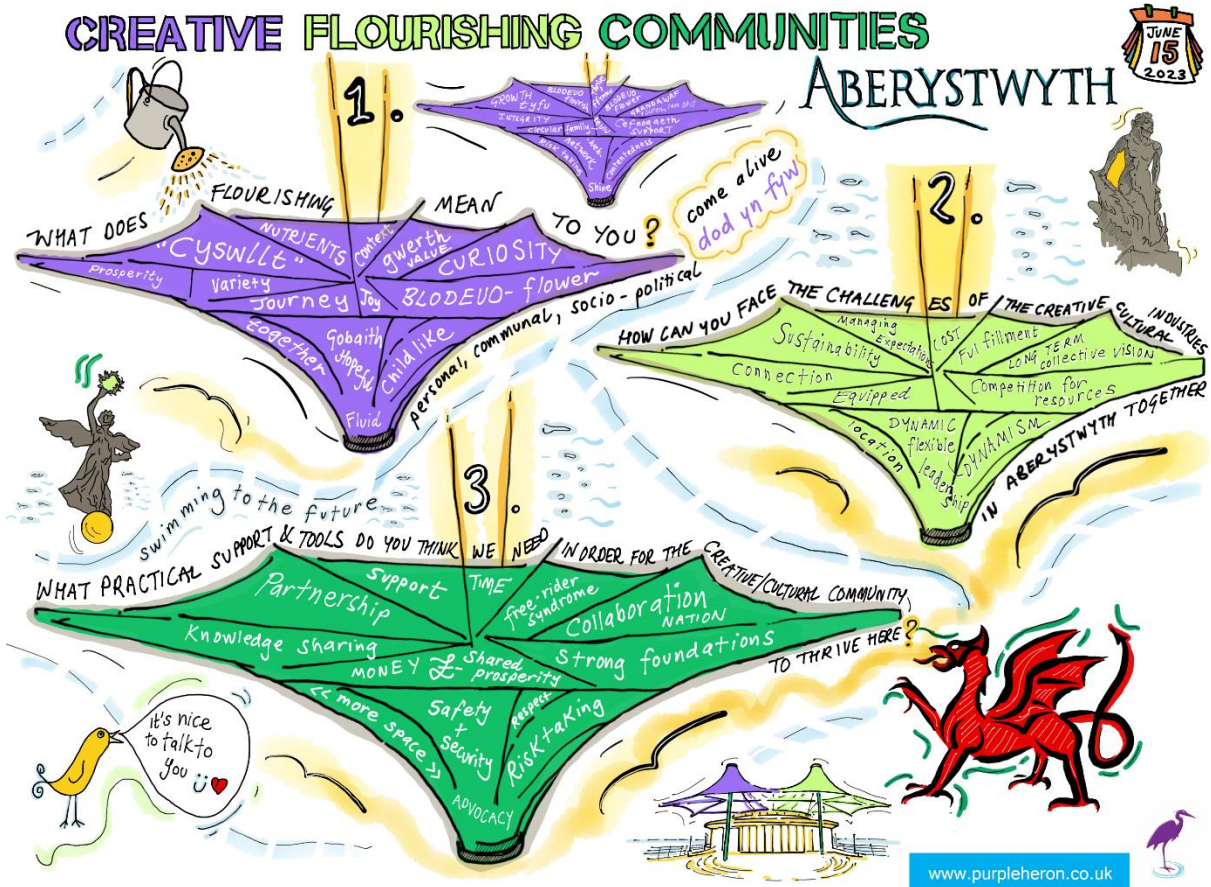
The Aberystwyth University Dialogue Centre hosted the event and invited FlourishCafé™ to invite speakers and facilitate the activities.

As a new endeavour working both within and outside the university, the Dialogue Centre brings diverse sectors together to discuss matters of significance. Situated within the Research, Business, and Innovation department at the university, the Dialogue Centre focuses on fostering knowledge exchange and evidence-based solutions to promote sustainable economies, active citizenship, and an improved quality of life in Mid Wales and beyond.

Visit: dialogue.aber.ac.uk to learn more.

Discussion Themes:

Discussions rounds were grounded in explorations of what flourishing meant to participants with English-speaking and Welsh-speaking backgrounds. Participants connected with metaphors of growth, blooming, journeys and fulfilments. They emphasised that flourishing required the proper nutrients, support, and conditions to excel and become the best versions of themselves.



Welsh speakers shared that ‘flourishing’ has no single direct translation. The English word did come close to several phrases or words such as ‘gwireddu’, ‘hapusrwydd’ and ‘ffynnu’. The most popular translation embraced by the group was ‘blodeuo’ meaning ‘to bloom’.

Whether in English or Welsh, flourishing emphasises a journey of self-fulfilment that is connected to one’s place, community, creativity and aspirations.

During the rounds of table discussions, participants captured their thoughts on paper laid out across tables. They were encouraged to create diagrams, sketches and lists together. Several themes emerged for the creative industries in the Aberystwyth area.



The need for space for creative pursuits

Participants emphasised that the flourishing of artistic pursuits in fine arts, performance, and literature relies heavily on having accessible, welcoming, and functional spaces for creating and sharing creative activities. While the Aberystwyth area does boast theatres, galleries, and other public venues for showcasing creativity, there was a common sentiment that there needs to be more dedicated spaces for artists and creative industry members to carry out their work. The participants strongly felt more workshop, studio, exhibition, and rehearsal spaces would nurture the growth of the creative industries.

Affordable space is a good investment

Participants stressed the importance of affordable studio and exhibition space as well as the need for different spaces designed for different uses. They shared that access to affordable space fulfils two requirements for flourishing creative communities.

Firstly, affordable spaces facilitate the production of new creative products and entrepreneurship. Access to the tools and equipment required to produce fine arts and crafts facilitates their production. Spaces fit for purpose for music and theatre rehearsal support their development. Participants shared that they needed different spaces for different needs and schedules. For example, spaces that are only open during business hours (Monday to Friday, 9-5) may not align with artists' schedules. Instead, the operation plans for these spaces should fit the creative rhythms of artists and their individual needs.



Secondly, these spaces offer significant opportunities for community building, fostering collaboration, and catalysing new ideas. Participants discussed how flourishing is closely tied to growth and blooming as well as networks, nurturing curiosity, and building solid foundations. When artists have dedicated spaces to practice their art, host writing workshops, or share works in progress and final exhibitions, it creates valuable opportunities for connection, knowledge sharing, and collaboration.

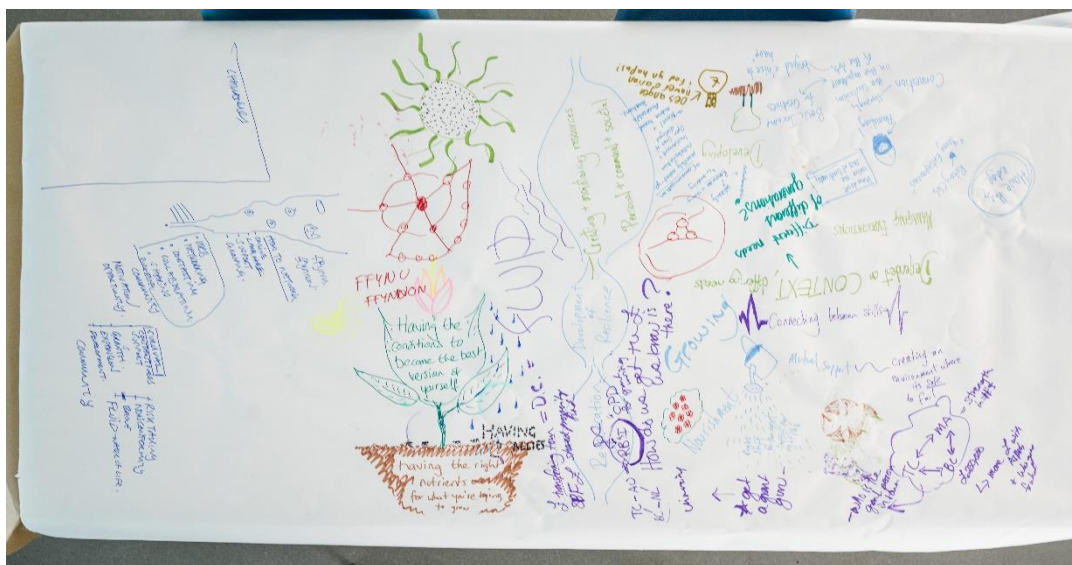
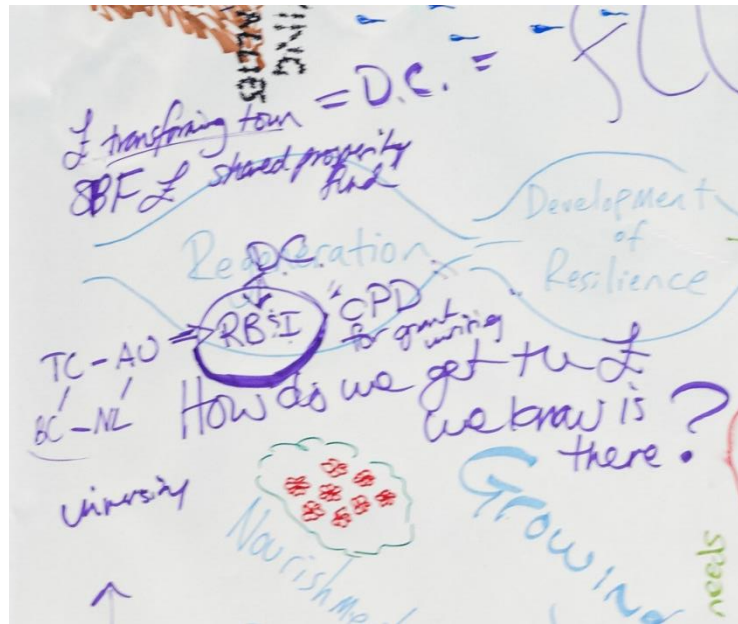
Foster collaboration instead of competition

Throughout the three rounds of conversations, participants discussed various challenges faced by the creative industries in Aberystwyth. One prominent issue highlighted was the struggle of some individuals to merely survive amidst the cost-of-living crisis, with a perception that wealth was not adequately reaching the areas in need.

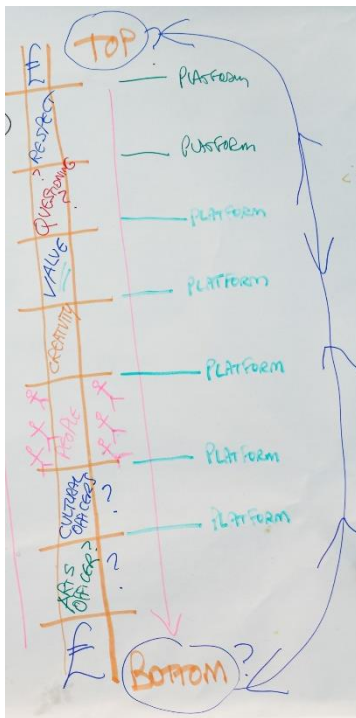
Participants expressed the need to shift towards a collaborative approach instead of pitting creative individuals and organisations against each other. They noted grant cycle too often focused on competition and narrow outcomes. They firmly believed that emphasizing collaboration over competition would open opportunities for more effective and fruitful partnerships.

Some tables identified existing collaborative and coordinated efforts across various spaces and institutions. They believed encouraging these approaches would elevate Aberystwyth 's profile and foster growth within and beyond in the creative industries. Collaboration aligned perfectly with participants' desires for connection, a strong foundation, and an environment conducive to co-creation of ideas.

Moreover, participants identified pre-existing strengths within the community that could be harnessed to coordinate programs and pursue funding collectively. Natural alliances such as the Business Club, Menter Aber, Aberystwyth Rotary, National Library Wales, School of Art, and Aberystwyth University as a whole were mentioned as potential key players in coming up with shared ideas and coordinating efforts to secure funding from the Town Council and Ceredigion County Council.



Use co-design and network approaches



In addition to identifying existing groups and institutions as strengths and opportunities for the creative industries, participants emphasised the importance of adopting co-design and network approaches in planning interventions and delivering strategies. They highlighted that past attempts using top-down hierarchical approaches had proven to be ineffective and unsuccessful (i.e., ideas that worked in Cardiff didn't match rural needs). Therefore, they stressed the need for interventions that operate at all levels, involving diverse stakeholders.

Participants expressed a keen interest in disrupting established systems and moving away from top-down approaches. Instead, they called for greater support for grassroots initiatives that originate from within the community. Emphasizing bottom-up approaches would empower local creatives and community members to take ownership of the strategies and interventions, leading to more meaningful and sustainable outcomes.

By embracing co-design, networking, and grassroots initiatives, the creative industries in Aberystwyth can establish a collaborative and inclusive framework that fosters innovation, creativity, and community ownership. Such an approach allows for a holistic and well-rounded development that addresses the diverse needs and aspirations of all stakeholders involved.



Support local and circular economy

Many conversations about flourishing creative industries in the Aberystwyth area mentioned the relationship between economic stressors and usual economic metrics used to measure success.



Participants identified tension between these metrics and aspirations for personal and community growth.

Participants also mentioned that support for the creative industries should position economic success metrics in service of culture. And participants supported comments that identified culture as a responsibility of all government departments and ministries at all levels and shouldn't be siloed to one jurisdiction. Positioning creative industries and culture — especially Welsh culture and language - would naturally support flourishing circular economies, local employment, social enterprise and communal spaces. By reorienting culture and arts from an activity done off to the side into something central for all, participants discussed how it could shift and create better wellbeing and sustainable economies.

Recommendations for Involving the Creative Industries in Consultation

The Aberystwyth University Dialogue Centre is a new endeavour to create innovative opportunities for knowledge exchange across sectors. The Centre seeks to create convening opportunities where individuals and organisations feel valued and can work alongside experts, businesses, and public service to identify evidence-based solutions to issues that matter to them.

FlourishCafe™ was one of the first opportunities to host such a conversation in Aberystwyth. Experiences during the event and feedback we received provide insight for local government and other sectors to consider when seeking to involve creative entrepreneurs in the Aberystwyth area.

Focus conversations on specific needs and solutions

Effective strategy begins with group sensemaking, where affected groups engage in conversations to share perspectives on the current situation and future possibilities. It helps them create shared understanding of their past, present and future.

However, the members of these industries are now eager to move beyond sensemaking discussions and transition to concrete actions. They are motivated to channel their energy toward practical implementation rather than simply discussing the issues at hand.

Many participants who attended the June 15 event belong to communities, organisations, and networks that have been interacting for years. Consequently, they already possess a shared understanding of the challenges and solutions affecting themselves and their respective organisations.

For future involvement, it is essential to identify specific areas of need within the broader arts and culture strategy. The approach should be to engage and empower the community to identify and prioritise realistic actions within the constraints of available resources. Participants are looking for involvement activities that validate their experiences and knowledge and lead to tangible outcomes that they can clearly identify.

Involve Welsh speaking facilitators

Care should also be taken to support Welsh-speaking facilitators in mid Wales so that future events like this for the arts, culture and creative industries involve Welsh speaking facilitators. Increasing the involvement of Welsh-speakers in co-facilitator and facilitator roles can improve event design with a deeper understanding of the bilingual and multi-cultural aspects of the Aberystwyth area and mid Wales based on lived experience.

The Welsh language is an integral part of the cultural heritage and identity of the local community. Language also shapes the way individuals and communities understand and create action within the world. By having fluent facilitators or co-facilitators, residents and stakeholders can engage in conversations, dialogues, and community events comfortably and authentically. This linguistic compatibility not only helps bridge potential language barriers but also fosters a sense of inclusivity and belonging, making participants more willing to express their ideas and concerns openly.

Furthermore, Welsh-speaking facilitators and co-facilitators support cultural knowledge and practices deeply rooted in the region's history. Welsh facilitation would help ensure the region's

unique and cultural heritage continues to thrive, enriching the collective identity of Mid Wales and reinforcing its distinct sense of place.

Value time and money

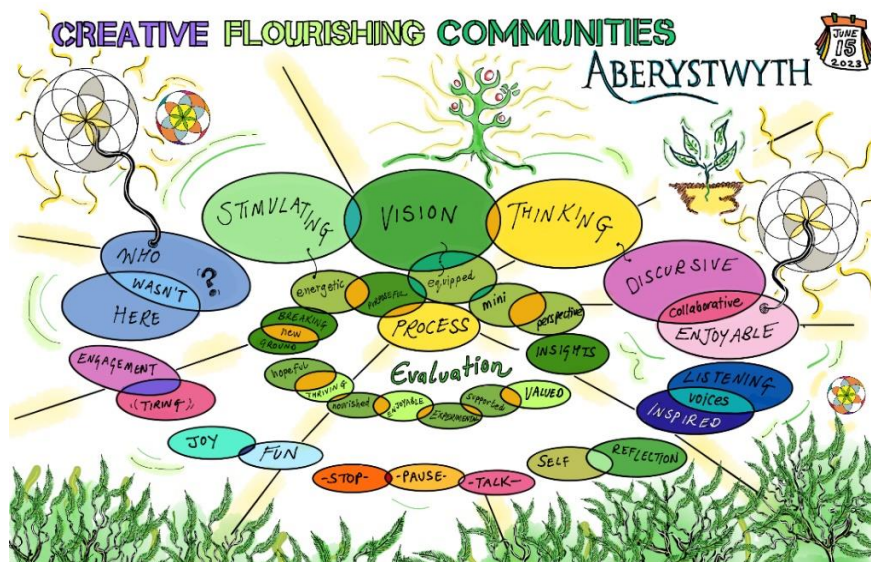
For entrepreneurs and professionals in the creative industries, participating in public involvement activities requires time and effort. It is essential to recognise and respect these realities.

Public engagement events often serve light refreshments for participants as a token of appreciation and to support them during sessions. For the FlourishCafe™ event, the Dialogue Centre went beyond this standard practice and prioritised providing a full meal of high-quality dishes created by a local restaurant. The extra effort was overwhelmingly appreciated by participants who identified the lunch as an important element of the programme and helped them feel valued.

Public involvement activities can represent a sacrifice of personal priorities and potential business earnings for participants. Their contribution can result in economic losses as they must forgo paid opportunities to be present. This was true for some FlourishCafe™ attendees who shared that they felt the financial pressures of taking four hours out of their Thursday afternoon to attend.

Identifying meaningful compensation for their involvement reduces the economic impact on participants and opens the door for a more diverse attendance, strengthening the input and outcomes of the collaborative efforts. Consultation organisers should explore ways to compensate participants for their time and expertise as a way of acknowledging the significance of their contributions.

At the moment, most government and higher education funding models in Wales do not seem to have adequate systems for financial compensation for public involvement and consultation. Financially compensating those who contribute to developing strategies and plans also demonstrates a commitment to inclusivity, equitable engagement and fair compensation that is core for many in the creative industries.



Aberystwyth University Dialogue Centre

The Aberystwyth Dialogue Centre would like to express its gratitude to the area's creative entrepreneurs, organisations and public servants for their participation.

This report is available to the public and has been shared with Cyngor Sir Ceredigion County Council staff and Aberystwyth Town Council members. We welcome further discussions of its findings and opportunities to support the use of the event and its outcomes in supporting strategy development and implementation.

As part of its strategy, the Aberystwyth University Dialogue Centre is also exploring ways of providing additional opportunities for Welsh-medium facilitation and dialogue training. The long-term aim is to offer opportunities for additional Welsh speakers to learn specific dialogue methods and workshop design, and collaborate as paid co-facilitators and lead facilitators. This will support the Wellbeing of Future Generations Action Five Ways of Working goal as well as research knowledge exchange activities within our bilingual institution.

FlourishCafé™

It was a delight and an immense privilege to be involved with the Dialogue Centre on this vital exercise for the people of Aberystwyth & surrounds. What was clear to me is that local residents are passionate about local culture, they are engaged on the issues that affect them and their community, and that they have a great deal of insight and knowledge into how to help themselves, their communities, and local culture to flourish in a post-COVID world.

I believe that we are in a particularly turbulent time when old systems and old ways of doing things are being challenged, and rightly so. But I also think that this means it is a great opportunity for decision-makers, policymakers, and local residents to find ways of working together, through genuine dialogue, to co-create a hopeful future for local residents.

The FlourishCafé community engagement model has been designed with exactly these aims in mind. We look forward to continuing to work with the Dialogue Centre and the people of the Aberystwyth community to help take this catalyst event to the next level for social change and social action and to support genuine opportunities for local residents to flourish as people, citizens, and creative disruptors.

Dr Eri Mountbatten-O'Malley, Director and Lead Host of FlourishCafé™