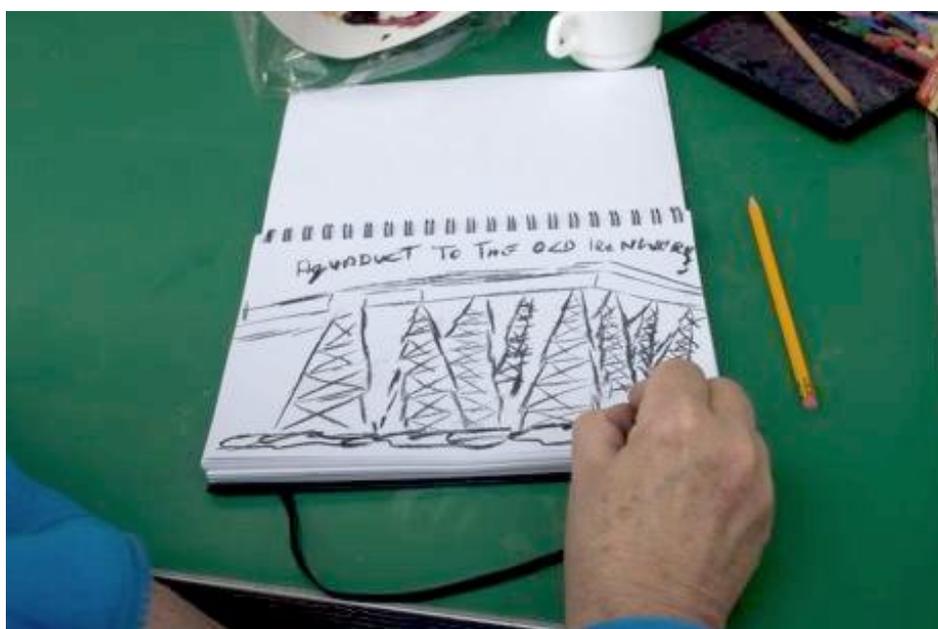


# engage in Cymru

Galleries engaging with Older People

## Pilot Project Case Study Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council



This case study resulted from one of a number of action research projects managed by engage Cymru focusing on engaging older people in art and gallery activities including within intergenerational projects. The projects took place during the period 2009-2011.

Case studies from other projects and full research reports are available on the engage website:

<http://www.engage.org>

## **Acknowledgments**

The extra time given and additional efforts made by of a number of people made this project successful and many thanks are due to them:

Bill and Dennis, Volunteers with Merthyr Alzheimer's Society Befriending Scheme, who transported participants, supported sessions and acted as co-researchers.

Kathy Jones-Williams, Befriender Manager, who coordinated participant recruitment and attendance, supported sessions and acted as co-researcher.

Ryan Stokes from Mentro Allan in Merthyr, who arranged for cakes to be delivered each week.

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## Introduction

In 2009-10 engage Cymru ran a pilot action research programme across Wales focusing on galleries, the visual arts and older people.

Its broad aims were to:

- Increase knowledge and understanding of visual arts in galleries across Wales, for an audience who may have limited experience of art
- Engage and enable participants to feel comfortable and confident in visiting galleries
- Promote informal Lifelong Learning opportunities
- Enhance the wellbeing of the older people participating and help combat social isolation, loneliness and boredom in older people

Six pilot projects were set up alongside action research to collect information to provide guidelines for future projects, examples of good practice and begin to build the body of evidence of outcomes to promote the engagement of older people as a core audience for gallery education. A case study of each project forms part of the programme report, available at [www.engage.org](http://www.engage.org).

In 2010-11 a programme of a further phase of three projects was set up in three more local authorities with similar broad aims. In each area a gallery partner and a freelance artist were involved. Again a research element was built into the projects and the findings from phase one were used to focus the collection of evidence from these projects which all involved older people with dementia. The programme was funded by the Arts Council of Wales, Welsh Assembly Government, The BIG Lottery, the Rayne Foundation and the Gwanwyn Festival of creativity in older age, which is hosted by Age Cymru.

This is the case study for the Merthyr project which was made possible with additional funding support from Merthyr County Borough Council and Mentro Allan in Merthyr and through the cooperation and work of:

- Cyfarthfa Castle Museum and Art Gallery
- Merthyr Alzheimer's Society
- Mentro Allan in Merthyr
- Artist Alice Briggs

Beyond the aims of the overall programme this project aimed to:

- Reconnect the museum and gallery with what was felt might be a forgotten community
- Explore the effects of participation in art activities on people with dementia living in the community and their families
- To encourage outdoor art activity
- Improve partnership working between the organisations taking part

## Project Description

### The artist



Alice Briggs is an artist from Aberystwyth. She studied Visual Performance at Dartington College of Arts and later went on to take an MA in Art Museum and Gallery Studies at Newcastle University. Museum collections and interpretation are currently strong themes in her practice, with a focus on objects and memory. Alice is the Director of the artists' group Blaengar, set up in 2006, and which aims to produce art in the landscape and built environment, support emerging artists, and promote cross-disciplinary collaboration.

Alice also works as an arts educator and exhibition interpreter. She runs workshops in textiles and screen printing, drawing, sculpture and installation.

### The participants

Eight individuals affected by dementia of different types and at different stages of development took part. There were six men and two women and all were associated with the Merthyr Alzheimer's Society. Other participants in the group included staff and volunteers from partner organisations and one family carer.

### The inspiration

The whole project took place within Cyfarthfa Castle Museum, Gallery and Park, which afforded many different inspirations. Participants were fortunate to have the opportunity to view a special exhibition of Turner landscapes alongside those of a local contemporary, Penry Williams depicting landscapes of Merthyr in the past. Some of the group were able to identify industrial features now long gone. On a second visit to the castle they toured the museum, paying particular attention to the ceramics collection, and one beautiful sunny morning saw the whole group enjoying



sketching in the castle parkland. The activity sessions were held in the Cyfarthfa Community Greenhouses, surrounded by colour and greenery providing inspiration for some plant drawings and colour work.

## **Partner support**

This project was characterised by the success of the partnership approach. Each partner actively pursued their own particular aims for the outcomes of the project in a way that added value to the project. For example Merthyr Alzheimer's Society were keen to ensure that their members benefited from the project and thus ensured that transport was made available for participants to attend and that there was adequate support for activities whereas, Mentro Allan, whose aim was to introduce the element of outdoor activity added extra support when outdoor activity was planned. There was excellent cooperation between all the organisations and individuals involved, each playing their own part in building a very successful project.

engage Cymru had overall responsibility for the project; Mentro Allan staff attended sessions, provided cakes and arranged for use of the Community Greenhouses for the activity sessions. Though not direct partners the Greenhouses' staff were very helpful and accommodating and contributed to the smooth running of the project. The Gallery and Museum staff facilitated the visits to the exhibitions and supported many sessions.



The role that staff and volunteers of Merthyr Alzheimer's Society played was fundamental to the success. It was through their work that the participants were recruited to the project, reliable transport was arranged for participants and staff and volunteers supported sessions. One member of staff and two volunteers (pictured in the greenhouse setting) who

attended regularly, were invaluable in supporting the participants and also contributed to the research element of the project by keeping a journal of their observations and reflections each session.

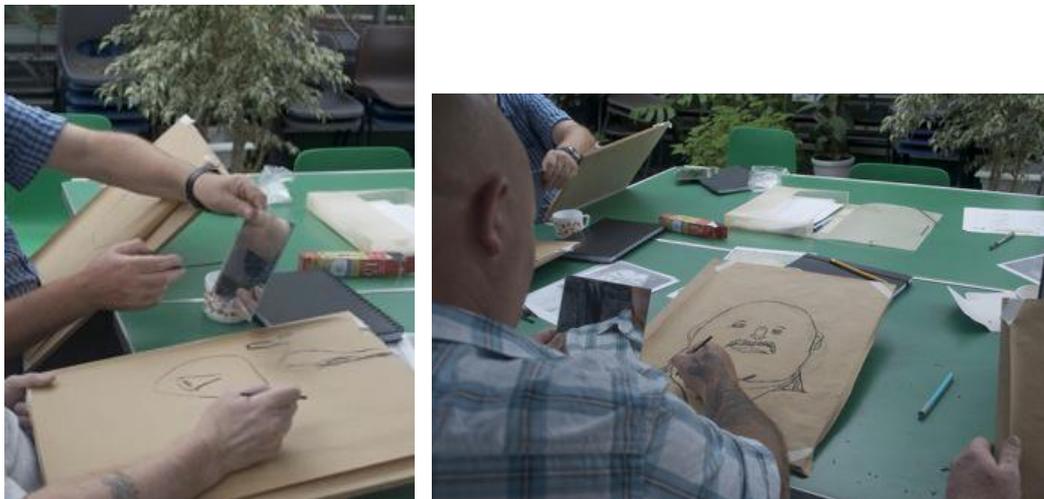
There was one week when there were no extra staff members available to attend. This made it a difficult session for the artist and volunteers, nevertheless the session was successful and progress was made on the art works being created.

## Activity

Artist Alice Briggs devised a challenging programme of activities for the group which, with patient support, resulted in the production of some interesting, varied and sometimes surprising art works.



At the first session, after an initial cup of tea or coffee and outdoor physical activity, name learning games created a relaxed and friendly atmosphere and helped everyone begin to get to know each other. Then participants faced their first challenge: a self-portrait in charcoal on brown paper using a mirror tile. More than one participant found understanding what was required and the process needed to achieve this difficult. In the left-hand photograph below, the abstract shapes at the top of the paper show a first attempt and the more recognisable face shape, below it, the result of considerable help. However, as can be seen in the right-hand photograph, others produced a recognisable self-portrait.



All participants engaged actively with all of the techniques and tasks that they were offered. As the programme proceeded and it was clear that they could respond to materials with which they were working and the objectives they were set, to different extents but each with their own unique and sometimes unusual perspectives. Helpers became less directive in their support and some interesting art work – which was more fully the product of the primary participants – resulted.



Participants were each given a book of good quality blank pages to use as what the artist termed a “visual diary”. It is a method she herself uses to record her experiences, sometimes drawing impressions, sticking in images from other sources such as postcards or cuttings from magazines and recording words, phrases and poems which she may later use as a reminder. Her hope was that group members would use

them between sessions. Concern that some of the group would not remember to bring them along each time meant that many did not take them home, but the books acted as a repository of some of the work that was completed in the sessions.

During the second session the group visited the Turner and Penry Williams exhibition at Cyfarthfa Castle, which included some landscapes of Merthyr. Security arrangements for the valuable paintings, the small space available and the limited mobility and physical strength of some of the group made the visit more difficult. Groups were limited to half an hour and this group would have benefited from more time to look and for the artist to lead a discussion about the paintings. They were given a talk by the Education Officer from the gallery, during which local landscapes were pointed out and some of the group followed with interest. Others, on whom the effects of dementia are more pronounced, appeared not to focus on what was being said, however even they had been engaged. When asked on return to the greenhouse which was their favourite painting, one picked “the one with the two little boys nearly falling over” a small feature within a large painting to which attention had been drawn in the presentation. On return to the workshop room the task was to draw something inspired by their visit. Those who could not do this copied photographs of Merthyr landscapes.



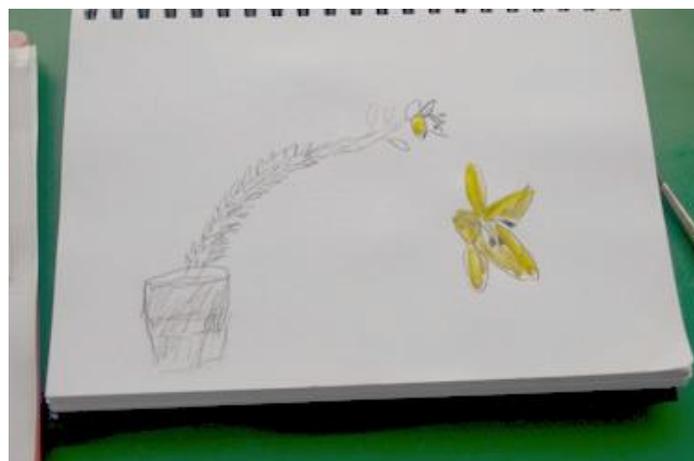
As the weeks progressed the group worked with charcoal, watercolours, clay, pastels and created collages of photographic and other visual images. Making clay coil pots proved a very popular and successful activity. One participant found difficulty in describing many of the art activities to the family after the sessions but made particular effort to describe the pot-making.



Working with the clay seemed easier for those who had had difficulty with some of the other tasks however it also provided an opportunity for a longer term, more challenging, planned piece of work for others, inspired perhaps by the second visit to the museum part of Cyfarthfa castle.



Group members reacted very differently to the different techniques and different stimuli offered within the sessions. Making use of the stimuli offered by the surroundings of the greenhouse, Alice suggested that they each choose a plant to draw. One of the people who had found the self-portrait difficult took up this task more readily and ably. Whether this was the nature of the task or the fact that by now all participants were more comfortable and confident in the environment it is not easy to say but a representational approach was adopted.



Another continued with a more abstract approach and created two impressionistic colourscapes which he afterwards associated with the titles of *summer* and *winter*, an association which was remembered through the weeks to when the two paintings were taken home at the end of the ten-week project.



## Celebration

An important element of the project was a celebratory exhibition that was held at the brand new Cyfarthfa Castle visitors' centre a few weeks after the final art session. Participants were pleased to be able to meet up again and to see the artist, Alice, again and they were able to see their own works framed and exhibited in a professional way. Family members were pleased and sometimes surprised to see the level of work that had been achieved.



It was also an opportunity for local professionals with an interest in older people and dementia to see the work and hear a short presentation on some of the very positive outcomes.

# The Outcomes

## For the older people with dementia

Observation and recordings of some sessions, journals kept by the artist, volunteers and staff from partner agencies, post-project interviews with family members and participants' own comments provided evidence of positive outcomes for participants. Many different elements of the activities and outcomes contributed to improved wellbeing for project participants as described below.

### Enjoyment

At the final session, a short focus group allowed participants themselves to express how much they had enjoyed the art course. One member of the group described the sessions as “Illuminating, interesting and educational” and said that he didn't know what he would do on a Tuesday now that the group was finishing. Asked to choose a favourite activity, many mentioned the pot-making but the general opinion was that all the activities had been good.

Video and audio recordings, volunteer and staff journals and observations all confirmed apparently positive, enjoyable and engaging activity for the major part of each session. Family members also commented how participants had enjoyed the art classes and in the main talked about the activities at home, and although some were not able to accurately describe what they had been doing, their enjoyment was conveyed. More than one family described how they had to encourage participation in other activities, but that enthusiasm for attending the art sessions was wholehearted.

Early in the project there were minor problems, for example with transport or a lack of familiarity with venue and personnel involved which caused some anxiety for some participants but these were quickly dispelled.

### Social interaction

Adding to the enjoyment of the art activities was the social interaction with participants commenting on how they had got to know each other and enjoy each other's company. Throughout the project the group sessions were characterised by good humour, quite a lot of laughter and growing interaction between members. The social element developed throughout the ten weeks, with group members greeting each other cheerfully on arrival and friendly banter over breaks for a



drink and cakes by the final session.

The two women participants sat together on most occasions and chatted together happily even though they had now known each other beforehand. Three of the men were well-known to each other prior to the project and they quickly involved others in their conversations.



The staff and volunteers who supported the sessions were important in encouraging the social interaction, making tea and coffee, chatting to individuals to help them with tasks, or more widely. One befriending volunteer worked intensively with an older, more reserved man. His wife commented on how important the attention and friendship shown by the volunteer had pleased and supported

her husband. She had had difficulty in encouraging him to take part at first, but once he had attended and knew that the volunteer (who also drove him to the sessions) would also be there, was keen to attend.



### **Concentration**

Over the period of the project there was a noticeable increase in level of concentration. One participant who found it difficult to settle to a task at the beginning, after a few sessions spent a full hour in complete concentration sitting in one spot focussing on drawing outside Cyfarthfa castle.

Volunteers and staff who had known these individuals prior to the project commented on the high levels of focus and concentration exhibited in participants once they were confident to engage with a particular activity. They were prepared to invest time and effort into each activity, whether the activities came easily or not and Alice's affirmation of their work gave them a sense of success.

One participant, who sometimes finds language difficult, expressed the change by saying "I was all...." and shaking his head and hands "at the beginning, but now I am all good" accompanied by a wide smile and still hands.

### **Confidence**

Increasing confidence was observed on two levels. At first, understandably, participants were a little uncertain what would be expected of them. They were not confident in social interactions, commenting or asking for explanations or materials, or even in choosing which sort of cake they would like. However, by the end of the project they were all much more confident. One group member has a habit of apologising as though he is concerned that

he made a mistake or done something wrong. By the end of the project this was happening far less often and another group member appeared far more confident and completely at ease with the group.

For some who had been cautious at first in engaging with the art activities their confidence to try out new techniques markedly improved. This was demonstrated by confident choices of colours, more and bolder marks on paper, an apparent better understanding of what was required and a willingness to comment on what they were doing.

### **Physical activity**

Family members reported that participants frequently watched TV or sat indoors for a major part of their day, though they were often restless. Increased physical activity would therefore be beneficial and the project provided opportunities to encourage the participants to take part in physical activities that they would not otherwise have encountered.

Full body movements included:

- Throwing and catching exercises used as ice-breaking activities in the first session
- Working the clay for making the coil pots, which required physically hard work, particularly on the first occasion
- Map work and collage, which required standing, sitting, moving between the two and reaching
- Walking: on the three visits to Cyfarthfa Castle participants were required to walk some distances

Fine motor skills development was also encouraged with drawing and painting activities. Some of the older members of the group were exhibiting deterioration in these skills at the beginning of the project with marks on the paper being faint, unsteady and inaccurate, however by the end of the project much more control was being shown.



### **Being outdoors**

Participants were exposed to a very pleasurable environment in the Community Greenhouses workshop, an indoor environment that had many of the attributes and benefits of being outdoors. There were high levels of natural daylight and surrounding greenery. Though rain prevented more use of the outdoors, some project activity took place out of doors.

### **Benefits beyond the project activity**

Many of the families reported changes of behaviour at home over the duration of the project.

Common included:

*“He does more things at home”*

*“She started doing little bits of house work again”*

*“He seems more interested in things”*

A volunteer who also attends a woodwork session with some of the group noted a difference in the way they tackled that activity too. One participant had started to suggest improvements in the way items were made and another was more able to get on with things by himself and did not need as much one-to-one support.

## **For their families**

Most family carers chose not to attend the art sessions themselves as they were keen to have a respite from caring responsibilities and very much appreciated the free time. They were also pleased with the effects that they saw in the participants over the period of the project. Several commented that individuals were in a better mood, “more cheerful”, “more settled”, “easier to deal with” during the period of the project and all said how keen participants were to attend. Some needed reminding that the art session was on but all were willing to get ready to go. Reflecting both on the respite from caring responsibilities and the changed behaviours and moods, one family member said:

**“Projects like this will make carers last longer!”**

*“Projects like this will make carers last longer!”*

Only one family member chose to attend the sessions, and enjoyed doing the activities alongside the person they were caring for. They valued the opportunity to meet the other participants who they previously knew by name but now felt they knew them more personally and would know them when they were mentioned again. Attending together had also provided new topics of conversation and new possibilities for social and cultural activities in the future.

Family carers were pleased, impressed and often surprised with the art work that had been produced. It had made them revise their perception of what the person they were caring for was capable of and several spoke of getting art materials (to encourage activity) and several also said that they would visit Cyfarthfa Castle museum and gallery as a family, as group members had talked about it.

## For volunteers

The volunteer befrienders who took part in the project enjoyed it a lot, found it interesting to take part and learned a lot about the individuals with whom they were working by seeing them in a different setting and by reflecting – for research purposes – on each of the sessions.

## For the artist

The artist had the opportunity to work with individuals whose perceptions of the world were changing and she found that challenging and interesting. She found the whole project interesting and stimulating and felt that it had provided her with a unique opportunity for professional development as an arts educator in an interesting field.

## For partner organisations

### Achieving aims

For the partner organisations their aims for the project were fulfilled.

<b>Aim</b>	<b>Result</b>
Increase knowledge and understanding of visual arts in galleries across Wales, for an audience who may have limited experience of art	Participants with dementia visited a local gallery for the first time in many years
Increase knowledge and understanding of visual arts in galleries across Wales, for an audience who may have limited experience of art	Participants were able to visit an exhibition of the work of Turner and Penry Williams and increased their understanding of visual art through their own work
Engage and enable participants to feel comfortable and confident in visiting galleries	Participants and families reported their intention to visit the gallery again
Promote informal Lifelong Learning opportunities	Learning opportunities were offered during the project and Merthyr Alzheimer's Society plan to offer further opportunities in Spring 2011
Enhance the wellbeing of the older people participating and help combat social isolation, loneliness and boredom in older people	As detailed in this report
Reconnect the museum and gallery with what was felt might be a	Participants visited exhibitions in the museum that they were able to

forgotten community	connect with through memories and culture
Explore the effects of participation in art activities on people with dementia living in the community and their families	A research element was arranged alongside the project
To encourage outdoor art activity	Participants were encouraged to undertake outdoor art activity and enjoyed it
Improve partnership working between the organisations taking part	As reported excellent partnership working was achieved.

### Lessons learned

One of the benefits of the excellent partnership approach was that many lessons were learned from the good practice of the other partners rather than from difficulties with running the project:

- The importance of good practical arrangements was learned from the excellent transport and befriending support provided by Alzheimer's Society
- The importance of avoiding preconceptions about people with dementia and raising aspirations for them to be creative and achieve new skills was underlined by the challenges provided by the artist and the way in which participants responded
- A far better understanding of individuals with dementia was achieved by the additional focus of befriending volunteers completing a reflective journal as part of the research element
- An appreciation of the value of working outdoors was gained by partners

Support staff and volunteers offered a lot of help with activities at first trying to get participants to comply with the task that Alice had set. However it soon became apparent to most that the tasks were intended as a stimulus or inspiration rather than an instruction and that participants' responses – surprising and unconventional as they might be – were valid and welcomed by the artist. A pre-project induction session for artist, supporters and those who know more about dementia would have offered the opportunity to discuss this issue and others before the sessions began.

Merthyr Alzheimer's Society was keen for members to take part in this project from the first approach made by engage Cymru. Having experienced the positive effects of the work, they are keen to develop more projects that offer opportunities for members to try new activities and develop new skills including further art projects.

## **Sustainability**

The success of this project has led to potentially sustainable developments. Firstly, the Alzheimer's Society were so pleased and impressed with the positive outcomes for their members that they have arranged a ceramics class to take place in the spring and many of the participants were already looking forward to it with enthusiasm.

Secondly, at the celebration event, both a senior member of the local mental health team and the coordinator for the strategy for older people felt that evidence of positive outcomes was so strong they wished to pursue some funding sources in order to put on more activity such as this. The engage Cymru Coordinator was able to offer help by providing details and the final research and practice development report will provide useful guidelines for them in setting up new projects.