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1	Introduction
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## *Is This The Best It Can Be?*

*Is This The Best It Can Be?* is [a toolkit](#) intended for use by anyone delivering arts and creative learning through collaborative or participatory projects and programmes.

The ideas and approaches build from a [research report into quality](#) by Rachel Blanche commissioned by Creative Scotland to inform understanding about quality.<sup>1</sup> Creative Scotland subsequently developed the toolkit in consultation with the sector in Scotland with pilot partnerships of artists, partners and participants using the tools and sharing learning.

The toolkit provides a set of resources to assist in project development, delivery and evaluation centred around a clear vision of what is important in a project or programme of work and what

## *Artworks Cymru Quality Principles and toolkit*

The Quality Principles are [an online resource](#) created in 2016 by Artworks Cymru on behalf of Arts Council of Wales to provide a framework for discussing and articulating quality in participatory arts contexts. The framework and toolkit was informed by Rachel Blanche's research for Creative Scotland, and was created with the support of a steering committee representing the sector in Wales and a series of practitioner focus groups.<sup>4</sup>

It is designed for use by artists and arts organisations with other main stakeholders including partners to ensure that participants 'get the best experiences possible'.

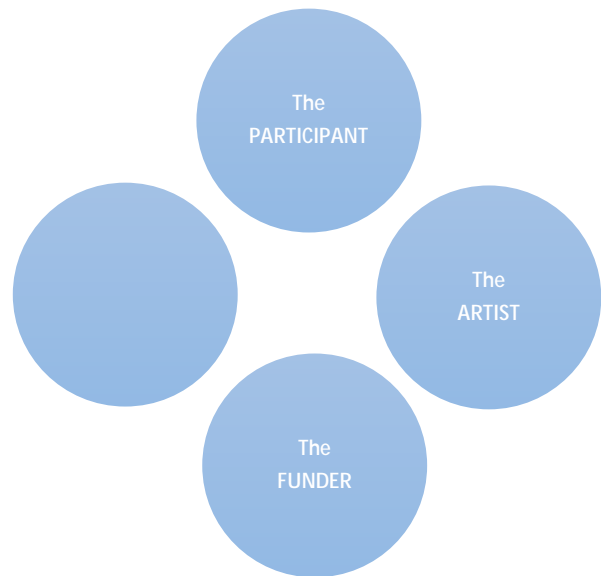
## What is the holistic quality approach being applied?

The toolkits in Scotland and Wales share the same roots in the same holistic quality model emerging from research undertaken by this author, outlined in her research report *Developing a Foundation for Quality Guidance*.<sup>7</sup> The research took in more than 100 sources on quality including earlier frameworks for the arts and education, as well as evidence from the sector generated by the UK Artworks Initiative<sup>8</sup> bringing unprecedented insights into artists' experiences with quality.

Features of the core approach fostered by both countries' frameworks are:

- Understanding of core **conditions\*** needed to enable quality, recognising **shared responsibility** by partners beyond the artist in enabling these conditions

(\*for details of what artists report these til



The toolkits facilitate dialogue between key partners to clarify roles for enabling core quality conditions. Establishing shared vision and mutual intention is central to that process.

Who influences what happens 'in the room' on the day with participants? The quality model incorporates evidence showing how quality is affected by decisions made by stakeholders outside or far from the room.<sup>9</sup> Participatory arts often involve multiple decisionmakers controlling the setting, recruiting participants, setting objectives and determining budgets. Dialogue between such partners is vital and quality planning should include those with influence over key conditions.

Find out more about this holistic quality model and the insights that shaped it in the report *Developing a Foundation for Quality* via the Quality Webpages of [Creative Scotland](#) and [Artworks Cymru](#).

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<sup>9</sup> Seidel, S., Tishman, S., Winner, E., Hetland, L. and Palmer, P. (2010) *The Qualities of Quality: Understanding Excellence in Arts Education*. Massachusetts: Harvard Graduate School of Education.



## 2

### Whose experiences are being reported here?

Online surveys and filmed case study interviews were conducted during 2020 in three countries where the holistic quality approach has been applied.

The surveys were disseminated with the support of respective funders of the participatory arts in those territories (Creative Scotland in Scotland, Arts Council Wales/Artworks Cymru in Wales and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Portugal).

The surveys were designed to capture the variety of ways that practitioners are applying this approach in their work with colleagues, external partners and project participants using the specific tools created in Scotland and Wales.

Detailed questionnaire responses were returned by a total of 42 respondents across Scotland, Wales and Portugal who are working professionally as freelance practitioners or in arts organisations involved with participation and creative learning.

The sample includes: 15 practitioners who responded to the survey about the Scottish *Is This The Best It Can Be?* toolkit, [as well as testimony from two artists interviewed for case study films](#); 18 practitioners who responded from Wales about the *Quality Principles* framework; and 9 organisations in Portugal carrying out participatory arts projects in the current edition (PARTIS III) of the flagship participatory arts programme funded by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. The respondents in PARTIS have made use of a Portuguese translation of the Scottish toolkit facilitated for them by their funder.

[A full list of the 44 individuals and organisations represented in this study can be viewed at the end of this paper.](#)

Wales

18  
respondents

Scotland

17  
respondents

Portugal

9  
respondents

## How the artists in this study define their own practice

Practitioners in Scotland and Wales<sup>10</sup> were asked how they personally describe the nature of their practice. Between them the 33 respondents [7ref\\*BQ00Tw 3.49 0 Td](#)

# 3 How the tools have been used by Practitioners

Three people *also reported using the toolkit internally for something else*

- *helping delivery partners (school teachers) develop projects;*
- *training emerging practitioners through higher education teaching and university projects;*
- *explaining 'what we do' to new staff* ~~10c 527~~ *Odw*

# 4

## Enhancements reported for Practice

The practitioners in Scotland and Wales who responded to the surveys say that engaging with their respective toolkits has demonstrably changed core elements of their practice.

Specifically, they report changes in the way they:

- [reflect internally](#), reported by three quarters of all



This has become a system of monitoring our core ambitions and expectations, a way to identify key milestones and apply learning as it happens. It is a constant tool that enables us to implement feedback in real time  
(Fraser, Sanctuary Queer Arts, Scotland)

The quality Arts ity



The process validates time needed by practitioners for considered quality planning:

gives

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Being able to give space and time to these conversations

and explorations at the start of our work together,

and having a frame for that, was invaluable

(Annabel, Sanctuary Queer Arts, Scotland)

It gives value

atat



Three quarters of toolkit users in all three countries<sup>19</sup> say that the approach has ENCOURAGED REFLECTION in their discussions

*What's different for our planning process as a result of using the toolkit is deeper reflection and wider staff involvement in planning*  
(Donald, Scottish Storytelling Centre)

The toolkit aids the quality of process by encouraging collective reflection and a record of the learning developed (Isabel, arts manager and evaluator, Portugal)

*What's different for our planning process as a result of using the toolkit is that I reflect on and understand the quality of my work* (anonymous freelance curator, Scotland)

 The tools are valued as a 

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<sup>19</sup> This statement was ticked by 9 respondents in Scotland, 16 in Wales and 7 in Portugal, representing 76% of all respondents in all three countries (n42).

More than half of respondents in Scotland, Wales and Portugal<sup>20</sup> feel that using the toolkit has helped support CURIOSITY, QUESTIONING and POSITIVE CRITICISM in their quality process.

It's so easy to slip into doing things the same way as we always / usually do them, particularly when working with regular partners.

[This] keeps us on our toes!

(Kate, Head4Arts, Wales)

The toolkit helps challenge our normal thinking and practice by offering a different model that enables all voices to be heard (Isabel, arts manager and evaluator, Portugal)

56% of respondents in Scotland and Wales *AGREE*<sup>21</sup> that using the toolkit has helped challenge or disrupt our normal thinking or practice

I was able to use the toolkit to question my normal approach to delivery, I've been looking deeper at what quality looks and feels like in my practice... to re-evaluate the properties that I think are present in my work, but perhaps haven't been

It's encouraged us to think differently

(Amy, freelance practitioner, Scotland)

<sup>20</sup> This statement was ticked by 8 respondents in Scotland, 10 in Wales and 6 in Portugal, representing 57% of the whole dataset (n42)

<sup>21</sup> For the 32 respondents for whom this statement was applicable, 18 (56%) agreed and 13 (41%) were not sure yet. One respondent selected 'disagree'.

The process reinforces practitioners' confidence about their own quality:

For three quarters of the users in Scotland, Wales and Portugal,<sup>22</sup> this approach *helps them to recognise where good practice exists* and to celebrate it

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Almost half the respondents<sup>23</sup> *agree* that using

 Using the tools has deepened communication about quality between internal and external stakeholders

It encourages and requires open and honest dialogue and takes into account feelings and experiences in a much more interesting way (Fraser, Queer Sanctuary Arts, Scotland)

The Quality Principles have been important in raising awareness **amongst all staff** of the requirements of good project planning, especially those who are not generally involved in project planning (Louise, Literature Wales)

This tool led the project team to reflect and debate ideas. The result was very positive, particularly because the team is made up of professionals from both the arts and the social sectors. This enabled greater convergence between the prevailing ideas from each of the two areas and to envisage how the individual parts can come together and create a whole that is more cohesive, organized and, above all, shares the same artistic, social and inclusion objectives (Ana Maria, Portuguese Chamber Orchestra)

The tools and methodologies of "Is this the best it can be?" had an impact on the definition of the points of reflection that made sense to the project ... taking into account the various levels of participation existing in the project (management, coordination, artistic, social, community, academic), **ensuring, above all, that it developed in a transparent and horizontal manner** (anonymous respondent, Portugal)



The principles definitely helped me to enhance the quality of what our participants experienced. This

It has allowed us, in a timely manner, to correct a proposed activity and replace it with another, having identified the positive and negative aspects of the change made  
(Helena, Orquestra de Afectos, Portugal)

*Having Quality Principles has had a positive impact on our work to clarify what is intended and, as a consequence, to improve the quality of the work ... as well as to identify, readjust and develop the missions and purposes of the project* (Catarina, Filarmonica Enarmonia, Portugal)

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I think that this has helped with funding applications to Arts Council Wales because it provides them with a yardstick evidencing that we know what we should be doing, and we are striving to do it! (Kate, Head4Arts, Wales)

For a third of the practitioners across the surveys in Scotland, Wales and Portugal,<sup>31</sup> having the toolkit MADE THEM FEEL EMPOWERED to address quality with their partners, commissioners or funders.

The tools provide a welcome structure for including quality in commissioning discussions

I normally bring copies of the paperwork to the early meetings

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All of the practitioners in all three countries <sup>32</sup> work in some way with external partners. Their main partners are shown opposite.

Other partners specified by respondents include:

- Environmental organisations
- Charitable by

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Enhanced communication between all stakeholders has been a clear benefit for practitioners

The toolkit increased positive communication between staff working on the project, which had a positive impact on the project (Lisa, Aberdeen Performing Arts, Scotland)

The

Almost half of the respondents in all three countries<sup>33</sup> say that using the toolkit has helped get all project partners on the same page with  
SHARED LANGUAGE AND VISION

The tool allowed us to organize ideas, structure objectives



## Shared language (again) is a big benefit when it comes to evaluating

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# 5

## Challenges and ideas for further development

Respondents were asked if they experienced any challenges using the toolkits and what else might help to implement the recommended quality approach. Operational feedback

There is appetite for more resources to help users find ways to adapt the tools for engaging participants in an appropriate way

Something to help participants engage with it - that doesn't have so much arts speak!

(Rhian, Operasonic, Wales)

We found the tool [didn't] match up with the reality of delivering our work in informal community settings

(anonymous community arts organisation, Scotland)

*The toolkit* helped us to pose the questions in a more objective way, both with our partners and with the participants. During the evaluation with the participants there were focus problems which we will have to find a way to overcome and enrich the reflection process

(Marisa, VELEDA Women and Single Parenthood, Portugal)

The Covid crisis creates a need for facilitated sessions for practitioners to reflect on how to adapt practice using the tools

One respondent asked for Covid-specific "training sessions for artists and organisations in the current climate reflecting the learning from the pandemic and adaptations Participatory artists and organisations have implemented to continue their work" (Louise, Literature Wales)

## 6 Full list of respondents in this study