

Appendix 2: What people want from the arts (Arts Council England, March 2008)

Introduction

In October 2006 Arts Council England launched one of the largest pieces of qualitative research into the arts and their funding ever undertaken. Overseen by an independent panel of experts, the arts debate gathered the views of over 1,500 individuals and organisations using cutting edge research techniques. Its aim was to find out whether, and how, people in England value the arts and to help the Arts Council focus on the things that really matter to people.

Trusting the results:

how robust was the methodology?

The arts debate was one of the largest pieces of qualitative research into the arts and their funding ever undertaken. It used a mixture of techniques, including in-depth interviews, discussion groups, open consultation and deliberative research to gather the views of over 1,500 individuals and organisations. Many of these techniques are at the cutting edge of qualitative research methodologies, and have been used by organisations including HM Treasury, the BBC, the Department of Health and local government to provide insight into complex and often contentious policy questions.

The research was designed so that the views it gathered were representative, and care was taken to ensure that participants had time to reflect on and consider the issues. This means that the views we gathered are deep as well as broad. The use of open consultation as well as formal research techniques made sure the debate was open to everyone who wanted to express their views.

To ensure the research was carried out with rigour and that the views collected were interpreted accurately and fairly the arts debate was overseen by a panel of independent experts. These were:

- Philip Cullum, Deputy Chief Executive, National Consumer Council
- Tony Hall, Chief Executive, Royal Opera House
- Julia Hobsbawm, Founder and Director, Editorial Intelligence
- Ian Kearns, Deputy Director, ippr
- Dame Suzi Leather, Chair, Charity Commission
- Masood Lone, Head of Equalities and Social Inclusion, London Borough of Camden

‘They take me to a place I’ve never seen before. They make me think differently, see things differently. They give me an experience of the world that I don’t expect.’

[Arts organisation, response to open consultation]

1

Why the arts matter

The majority of people believe the arts can play an important role in the lives of individuals and society. There are three main ways in which people describe the value of the arts: capacity, experience and applications.

The arts can help build people’s **capacity** for understanding and navigating the world. They can help people express themselves and communicate with others, offering an alternative ‘language’ to help people understand each other better. The arts can provide a different perspective on life, challenging people’s assumptions and broadening their horizons. Some people describe the arts as inspirational – they stimulate imagination and encourage people to ‘think the unthinkable’. For some the arts are both a record of what society was like in the past and a means of exploring how things might be different in the future.

‘It takes people to somewhere else you know...they could be having a dreadful time at home or bored and it just takes them to new places, or opens their minds because they can hear a different type of music or try different food or learn something about their own culture or somebody else’s.’

[Young adult, medium arts engagement, suburban]

The arts can enrich people’s **experience** of life, providing colour, beauty, enjoyment, relaxation and a source of solace and escape. For some people the arts offer an important emotional outlet.

‘My mum, when she wasn’t feeling too good, she’d write poetry. It might have been dark but it was her way of expressing things.’

[Parent, high arts engagement, urban]

'Relaxation, enjoyment, inspiration, all them things, if you didn't have that access to art, you'd do a full day's work, you'd go and get pissed and you'd go home and go to bed.'

[Parent, high arts engagement, urban]

'Children are wrapped up in consumerism and blinded by advertising...I think it does enrich their lives and I think it gives them a much more thought-provoking aspirational life'

[Parent, medium arts engagement, suburban]

Because the arts can have these effects on people as individuals, they are also seen to have some wider outcomes or **applications**, such as bringing people together, creating links between different communities and encouraging people to feel a sense of pride and belonging in their local area. The arts are also seen as an aspect of learning, skills and personal development, particularly for children and young people.

'I think when you've been to something, you also feel that you're communicating with everybody else that's been there, you're part and parcel with them, it's cohesive again, isn't it?'

[Retired, medium arts engagement, urban]

Whose views? Participants in the arts debate

A wide range of people took part in the arts debate.

Public

Members of the public were chosen to represent all sections of society: gender, age, lifestyle, ethnicity, socio-economic group and level of engagement with the arts. We included a mix of people who defined themselves as very, fairly or not interested in the arts – around a quarter fell into the last category. Discussion groups were held across England, in urban, suburban and rural areas.

Artists

The sample of artists included classical, rock and blues musicians, actors, playwrights, dancers, painters, sculptors, photographers, writers, poets and crafts people. They were all professional in that they made at least part of their living as artists. Some were publicly funded while others were partly or entirely

commercial. The sample was ethnically diverse, represented every region and included artists working at local, national and international levels.

Arts organisations

We gathered views from people working in theatres, galleries, orchestras, opera and dance companies, record labels, literature and craft organisations. The sample included staff from participatory and community arts and those focusing on specific audiences such as young people and disabled groups. We also recruited umbrella groups and representative bodies such as trade unions. Some were funded by the Arts Council, either regularly or for specific projects.

Other stakeholders

We wanted to hear views from other arts funders and organisations outside the arts that have connections with the arts through their work. The sample included local authorities, foundations, corporate sponsors, regional cultural and development agencies, health and education institutions, and charities and representative bodies.

'It's something that makes the hairs on the back of your neck stand up.'

[Member of the public, deliberative event]

2

Generating the benefits: the importance of quality and innovation

It was widely agreed that quality and innovation are vital ingredients for the arts to be beneficial.

Quality in the arts is perceived in different ways by different people.

- Quality of **experience** is valued by everyone, particularly the public, and includes art that helps people to understand something new about the world or enriches their experience of life in some way.
- Quality of **product** is often referred to by arts professionals and is a notion of quality that is independent of audience response and can be judged by

the level of technical expertise involved and the contribution it makes to an artform or body of work.

- Quality of **project** is especially emphasised by the wider stakeholder community and reflects how well an arts organisation or activity is run and the extent to which it meets its objectives.

Many members of the public and some arts professionals prefer to describe quality in the arts with words such as 'excitement', 'surprise' and 'enrichment'.

'Quality of performance involves a feelgood factor, intensive, innovative, thought-provoking, depressing, outrageous. It is stirring emotion, stimulating and getting a reaction.'

[Arts professional]

Innovation is seen as an important part of the overall quality of experience. There is a concern that very innovative work can be alienating. However, many people look to the arts for a richer experience of life, including being surprised by something new. After considering and debating the issue, most people concluded that innovation is essential to heighten the experience of the arts – even if that experience is sometimes difficult or disturbing. For this reason, the arts need to keep moving and pushing back boundaries.

'Quite often the new in the arts can seem strange or unfamiliar, even threatening, but without patrons of courage and vision there would have been no Cezanne, no Samuel Beckett, no artists pushing the frontiers of imaginative communication.'

[Female, response to open consultation]

What is new and unusual for one person may be old and familiar for another, but what is important is the creation of artistic experiences that are surprising and stimulating for those that experience them.

Low, medium and high arts engagement

It was important that the research with the general public represented all sections of society, not just in terms of gender, age, lifestyle, ethnicity and socio-economic group, but also in terms of level of engagement with the arts. We therefore asked people to define themselves as either very, fairly or not interested in the arts, and ensured that we gathered views from all three groups. They are identified in the quotes as having either 'high arts engagement', 'medium arts engagement' or 'low arts engagement'.

'When I went to the theatre...everybody was dressed up to the nines and you know, I sort of went in jeans and I felt totally out of place that these people had come to an event and they had all dressed up and everything else, and I felt like a victim really.'

[Young adult, low arts engagement, urban]

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Quality arts experiences for everyone:
overcoming barriers to participation

Because enriching, challenging arts were seen to create important benefits for both individuals and communities, it was considered essential that as many people as possible should be able to access and enjoy high quality arts experiences. However, it was clear that not everyone is currently engaged with the arts. There are people from all parts of society who feel a strong sense of exclusion or who simply do not want to take up the opportunities that are currently available.

Although lack of money or difficulty in finding or getting to the arts can be reasons for not engaging, in the main the barriers appear to be psychological rather than physical. The arts can be a risk in terms of what they offer to the individual – that is part of the attraction for some, but can put others off.

'That's where you get stuck because if it's not something you've ever done and never really got to know, then you don't know whether you are going to really enjoy it and it's then finding that time to actually get to know whether you really want to do it.'

[Empty nester, low arts engagement, rural]

Many people feel uncomfortable about trying something new in the arts, even those who are already quite involved. People are concerned that they might not enjoy it or that they might not understand it or know how to respond. Some feel that the arts are just not for people like them. They believe they wouldn't fit in at an arts event and might be looked down on by other members of the audience.

'If I went to something I hadn't experienced before, would I have the confidence to say "Yes, I like this" or "I don't like this", or understand it?'

[Empty nester, high arts engagement, rural]

Increasing public engagement is a high priority for lots of arts organisations. For many this means reaching out to new audiences, particularly those who have little or no engagement with the arts. Organisations such as local authorities often work to widen participation and make the arts more accessible to specific audiences. Many believe that the arts are at their most powerful when they engage the most disenfranchised people. By giving voice to those in the most difficult circumstances or on the margins of society, the arts are seen to help strengthen and regenerate local communities.

For many, empowering people to feel comfortable with the arts is as important as enabling wider access. This means equipping people with the information, knowledge and confidence to seek out arts experiences that are valuable to them and helping everyone to build their own, more creative lives.

What do we call it? Art or the arts

Part of the research explored what people think of as ‘art’ and ‘the arts’ today. For many, art is an integral part of day-to-day life. Most people believe that a wide range of things can be considered ‘art’, from music, painting and drama to fashion, design, architecture, cooking and sport. By contrast, ‘the arts’ are seen as something less accessible and as separate from people’s day-to-day experience of the world. So while most people are happy with a broad definition of art, they would like to see ‘the arts’ become a term with more relevance and appeal to more people.

‘But with that, ‘the arts’, you do tend to confine it to a few things and then it is elitist and it is middle class, but when you look at all these things here, and put them under the arts then that is a different thing altogether, in my opinion. I wouldn’t have thought about it in that way.’

[Parent, high arts engagement, suburban]

‘A really good drama, different portraits, landscapes, sculpture that inspires and is thought-provoking. Sometimes you see something and you think “wow”, this gives me a different perspective on things – so that would be art.’

[Parent, medium arts engagement, suburban]

‘If it does not offer quality of experience, why bother with it?’

[Member of the public, deliberative event]

Challenges for the Arts Council

Two main issues emerged from the arts debate as key challenges for the Arts Council in the medium and long term: quality of experience and accountability and transparency.

There are many different outcomes that public funding of the arts could seek to achieve. During the arts debate members of the public, arts professionals and our other stakeholders worked extremely hard together to agree priorities and principles for funding the arts that, as far as possible, meet the needs and aspirations of everyone.

They concluded that the Arts Council will create most value for the public by focusing on enabling as many people as possible to **experience high quality arts** that excite, enlighten, move, stimulate or challenge them. In other words, it's not enough for the Arts Council to support artists and arts organisations to put on their best work – but we also have to care about more than just the number of people in the audience.

Many people believe that the Arts Council needs to do more to bring the arts closer to people's lives. In the future, they would like to see more excellent, innovative work that reaches out to and engages people in new ways. Because quality of experience means different things to different people, the Arts Council needs to help ensure that there is a richer, more diverse mix of opportunities to get involved in the arts in this country.

Members of the public, arts professionals and other stakeholders all believe that **accountability** is very important for the Arts Council and the organisations we fund. At the same time, people are concerned about time-consuming and expensive forms of bureaucracy, and that too much measurement might hold back the creative process. Some members of the arts community would like the Arts Council to use our judgement and instinct more, and trust artists and arts organisations to get on with what they have been funded to do.

'You need to take some risks and not measure everything – measurement can inhibit creativity.'

[Arts professional]

However, one of the Arts Council's major challenges is that among members of the public and the arts community there is very little understanding of how we currently make decisions. Many people would like our funding processes to be more **transparent**.

There was also a strong call for both members of the public and arts professionals to play a greater role in decision-making. Members of the public would like to ensure that decisions are made in the best interests of 'ordinary people', not just the established arts world. Members of the arts community would like to ensure that the Arts Council remains in touch with arts practice and the realities of running an arts organisation.

By the end of the debate members of the public had increased respect for the role of experts – they recognised how difficult the decision-making process could be and were less convinced about public involvement at every stage. In contrast, some members of the arts community came to feel that members of the public could bring a great deal to the process and should be more involved.

'I think public opinion is just as valuable. The best experts will know about public opinion. The public needs an input.'

[Arts professional, deliberative event]

Overall there was a strong sense that a wider range of voices – both professional and public – should be engaged in decision-making in some way, and this will form an important part of the Arts Council's future strategy.

'[Art] helps me understand the times I'm living in. It helps me see other perspectives. It makes me feel less alone. It makes me feel more human. It connects me more to the rest of humanity.'

[Female, response to open consultation]

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Working in partnership

The Arts Council is one of a wide range of organisations and individuals working to support, produce and involve people in the arts in this country. The Arts Council works closely with arts organisations, the voluntary sector, local authorities and other funders, and the arts debate made it clear that there is scope for us to develop more effective partnerships, with greater clarity about respective roles and responsibilities.

The Arts Council's renewed focus will be to enable as many people as possible to experience challenging, exciting and enriching arts. After the Arts Council, local government provides more revenue funding for the arts than any other body in England and tends to focus on achieving broader outcomes for local communities.

The arts debate makes clear the links between the individual value of engaging in quality arts activity enjoyed by the public and the benefits this can then deliver for the wider community. We need to work with our partners, particularly local government and regional stakeholders, to fully understand the conditions needed to achieve high quality engagement in the arts that will also contribute to broader outcomes for communities and society as a whole.

As well as strengthening our partnerships with our co-funders and other stakeholders, we also aim to develop more mutually beneficial relationships with the organisations that we fund, based on a deeper understanding of shared aims and needs on both sides.

What happens next?

We believe the arts debate has made an important contribution to the ongoing discussion about the nature and value of the arts and the purpose and role of public funding. It has also presented the Arts Council with a number of opportunities and challenges for the future.

The early findings have informed the development of our corporate plan for 2008 to 2011. This will reflect our overall mission to enable everyone to experience arts that enrich their lives, and will focus on fostering excellence, innovation and widespread reach across a diversity of artistic practice and communities.

In 2008–9 we will be working to address some of the longer-term challenges. In particular we want to improve our decision-making processes by being clearer about the outcomes we seek to achieve and drawing more on the expertise and ideas of artists, arts organisations, members of the public and other stakeholders. The arts debate has been a very valuable process for the Arts Council and we believe that ongoing consultation and dialogue will help us to become a more effective, accountable and trusted organisation.

Finally, we believe the arts debate has initiated a new kind of conversation between individuals and organisations everywhere about what the arts mean to people today. In the future the Arts Council will seek to widen and deepen this conversation, allowing more voices to be heard and more experiences shared. Ultimately we hope this will enable everyone to feel that the arts are and can be for them.