

# Achieving great art for everyone – everywhere: LGA response to the Arts Council strategic consultation 14 April 2010

## About the LGA

The LGA is a voluntary membership body and our 422 member authorities cover every part of England and Wales. Together they represent over 50 million people and spend around £113 billion a year on local services.

They include county councils, metropolitan district councils, English unitary authorities, London boroughs and shire district councils, along with fire authorities, police authorities, national park authorities and passenger transport authorities. The 22 Welsh unitary authorities are in corporate membership through the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) which retains full autonomy in dealing with Welsh affairs.

## Response

1. The arts are an expression of what it is to be human. What they mean to us is inseparable from our identity – as individuals, and as communities. However universal its reach and significance, artistic production is always about the people who practice it, and the places in which they practice – Hull and its poets or West Yorkshire and its painters and sculptors. Even digital creation has its human geography, both virtual and real.
2. This means, of course that the arts enrich the lives of the communities where they are made. Debates setting “intrinsic” against “instrumental” value or “elite” against “low” culture are fatuous. People who are able to experience the arts are more likely to be healthier, law-abiding and engaged in civic life, precisely because of the nature of the artistic experience. Thriving and excellent arts attract visitors and have economically valuable spin-offs precisely because they are something many people want to enjoy.
3. It is no surprise, then, that local government remains, as it has always been, a vital part of the ecology of the arts. From the Chester Mystery Plays, commissioned by the town’s mediaeval guilds, to Jeanie Finlay’s digitised reflection on Anish Kapoor’s Sky Mirror commissioned by the council-supported Nottingham Playhouse, local communities continue to foster the production of excellent arts for and in their places, to make their places better.

## Key Messages

- Outside London, councils invest as much as the Arts Council in our arts services and infrastructure. This makes local authorities the principal partner for ACE in delivering great art for everyone;
- Great Art for Everyone must be pursued, in rural as well as metropolitan areas and in partnership with small as well as large

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councils. The Arts Council should explicitly commit to excellence outside London;

- Councils are not just funders of the arts, but also play a key brokering role in supporting local community and voluntary arts groups, and a management role that helps provide a framework in which artistic vision can be brought to fruition;
- The Arts Council must increasingly work in a joined-up way with other national agencies to ensure its expertise, resources and passion contribute to creating unified, authentic cultural offer in local places.

### The proposed vision

4. The vision proposed in *Achieving great art for everyone*, which is one which the LGA and local government can broadly support. In particular, we share the ambition to increase participation and engagement, to give the arts a dynamic civic role, and to develop the creative industries.
5. We have two comments, though. They mainly stem from the breadth of the vision.
  - a. First, it is worth understanding what exactly the significance is of seeing “this country as a global creative hub” and a “platform for world-leading excellence”. There are a number of ways in which the country as a whole might have this role – for example, if England were to benefit from a tax regime which discriminated in favour of artists, as Ireland has done for writers.

But we need to acknowledge that England’s artistic profile will mostly be driven by clusters of excellence in individual places and sectors. As things stand, London is the focus for many of the public sector’s largest investments in the arts, but many places outside London are home to artists and organisations with a global profile.

In practice, we hope ACE will explicitly recognise that “England” is shorthand for the collection of centres of excellence that make up the country, and that this will need to be reflected in the way that the future strategy is delivered.

- b. Secondly, the vision is all-embracing. We do not think the activity of ACE, or indeed of the public sector as a whole, should be, though. ACE should not seek to fix everything, let alone steer everything.

Many elements of the vision seem to us to reflect a sensible anticipation of what artists, communities, and wider social and economic pressures will bring about for themselves. It would be wrong for public bodies to think they should substitute for others’ good judgement – and it may be right for the public

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sector to make some strategic decisions to get out of the way. This is both a point of principle, but also an important way in which we will need to take into account the likely constraints on public spending.

6. Finally, some elements of the vision read a little like a policy-driven programme for what work will be commissioned - for example, "The arts...bring critical insight to...how we adapt to a low-carbon future". We do not consider that would be an appropriate approach for ACE. Artists should be able to reflect social change as they see fit; policy-driven patronage impoverishes the arts, even when it does not reduce them to propaganda.

## The goals

7. There are five principles which are important to local government which we are delighted to see reflected in ACE's proposed goals. We think they could, if anything, be brought out more emphatically and reflected more uniformly across the goals. We are not certain that five goals are necessary, though. ACE's emphasis should in our view be on increasing participation and commissioning excellent art. The other three goals are in our view secondary.
  - a. The role of the arts in civic life: it will be obvious from the LGA's overall approach that we see the arts as central to civic life and we are very pleased that ACE does, too. We think that this is not only part of the agenda for goal 5 (sustainability) but also goals 1 (excellence) and goal 3 (participation).
  - b. Increasing participation: local authorities are aiming to increase arts participation; this is also the government's only national objective, as reflected in PSA targets, for the arts; we support goal 3 strongly, therefore, and can only express mild surprise that it is not higher up the running order.
  - c. Funding partnerships: we have been extremely pleased with the ACE's recent approach to joint working with local government, which recognises that, excluding a small number of London-based centres of excellence, each contributes roughly the same amount of money to the arts and very often by co-funding the same organisations. We strongly encourage ACE to go further in joining up the funding conversation between itself and local councils where they have shared interests in an organisation, but also to do more to align funding criteria across the partners. We were slightly concerned to see that the partnership principle is reflected in the detail of goals 3 (participation), 4 (young people) and 5 (sustainability), but not in goal 1 (excellence). We would like to reassure ACE that excellence is unquestionably an objective which local government pursues through its arts funding.
  - d. Shared advocacy: we would be keen that ACE should work with the LGA Group, and with councils through the National Improvement Programme, to develop a shared evidence base

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and common messages for the kind of advocacy suggested in goals 3 and 5.

- e. 2012 cultural legacy: councils are working hard to deliver a cultural legacy from the 2012 Games and hope that this will be an increasingly strong theme of partnership with ACE.

### **Future organisation, approach and funding mechanisms**

8. We believe it would be right for ACE to become more focussed, and to develop more flexible funding mechanisms. In order to get the best value from the limited amounts of public money which are likely to be available in the future, we suggest that ACE needs to adopt the following principles:
  - focus should mean doing less, and concentrating on a core mission of increasing participation and funding excellence;
  - flexibility mustn't become code for lack of transparency, which is essential if partnership is to work well;
  - better partnership is essential in a tougher financial climate; that requires strong communication with funding partners such as councils, shared funding methodologies and criteria, and shared approaches to appraising the performance of funded organisations;
  - better experiences for citizens, including the quality of life in the places they live in, are ACE's (and councils') real and only main objective, and it would be wrong to allow ACE's understandable interest in the managerial health of funded organisations to take priority over that.
9. We look forward to pursuing what we see as a very constructive conversation with ACE as the consultation moves to its next stages.

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