

**BALANCING EXCELLENCE & PARTICIPATION IN
LOCAL GOVERNMENT ARTS PROVISION**

by

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1 INTRODUCTION

In terms of performance management many local authority officers are committed to delivering quantitative outcomes for participation through the local area agreement performance indicator NI11 'Engagement in the Arts'.

Whereas, following Sir Brian McMaster influential review *Supporting Excellence in the Arts: From Measurement to Judgement* (2008), current policy direction within both Department for Culture, Media and Sport¹ (DCMS) and consequently Arts Council England² (ACE) is highly influenced by the qualitative concept of excellence.

McMaster's recommendations are clustered under the following headings of;

- Encouraging excellence, innovation and risk-taking
- Encouraging wider and deeper engagement with the arts by audiences
- Judging the quality of the arts in the future

Whilst a focus on the quality of artistic experience has been welcomed by many practitioners as reinvesting the arts with intrinsic value and reaffirming the central role of the artist, tensions have arisen from these top down directives for local authority officers with an arts remit.

The sub-heading used by McMaster indicates the intention to adopt a light touch and establish a non-bureaucratic method for judging the quality of the arts. However, in terms of the prescribed targets for participation this divergent agenda poses conflicting aims fraught with inherent tensions. As the recommendations lack the detail necessary for translating McMaster's suggestions into a realistic and practical implementation plan, striking a

¹ For further information about DCMS visit www.culture.gov.uk

² For further information about ACE visit www.artscouncil.org.uk

balance between striving for excellence and also attaining participation targets presents a challenge for local government arts provision.

Therefore this research was perceived to be of value, excising idealism from the concepts under debate and offering insider perspectives from a strategic viewpoint to the most recent challenge for cultural leaders operating within a local authority context.

To that end this study seeks to assess the impact of central government directives relating to both participation and excellence on local authority officers, evaluate their relevance within a wider theoretical context and offer recommendations to operationalise seemingly contradictory objectives at a strategic level.

The research is therefore rooted in a social setting with political influences and has been largely confined to the UK due to the parameters of the enquiry.

2 RESEARCH AIM & OBJECTIVES

The principle aim of the research was to explore tensions between attaining participation targets and aspiring to excellence in demonstrating the value of the arts within a local authority context.

The specific objectives included:

- Define excellence and establish its relevance from the perspective of: DCMS, Arts Council England, Local Authority Arts Officers and Arts Practitioners.
- Identify and analyse how many authorities are including NI11 'Participation in the Arts' as part of their Local Area Agreement.
- Evaluate the impact of recent directives relating to both participation and excellence on the sector.
- Identify the extent to which this has resulted in a change of process, practice or programming.
- Explore how local authorities are currently evidencing excellence against institutional, instrumental and intrinsic values.
- Establish what prevents processes, practices and programmes from achieving excellence.
- Recommend ways in which local authority officers can reconcile the tensions of participation and excellence to better demonstrate the value of the arts.

3 KEY CONCEPTS & DEFINITIONS

The following key definitions, as used in the research, are detailed below in order to provide conceptual clarity.

Excellence – is the state or quality of excelling. Excellence is considered to be an important value in many sectors and as such is a goal to be pursued.

The single definition used to represent the concept of excellence in the arts and inform research design and collection is as follows:

‘excellence in culture occurs when an experience affects and changes an individual’ McMaster (2008)

Participation – the process of involving people in projects, policy reviews or activities to encourage decision-making and empowerment, ownership of opinion and influence services.

The single definition used to represent the concept of participation in the arts and inform research design and collection is as follows:

NI11 ‘Engagement in the Arts’ - The percentage of the adult population (aged 16 plus) in a local area that have engaged in the arts at least three times in the past 12 months; either attending an arts event or participating in an arts activity. (Department for Communities and Local Government 2009)

The researcher acknowledges that other definitions of these key concepts exist; these are explored in more detail within the literature review and research findings.

4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The following methods have been employed in an empirical study of the research concepts:

- Review of the literature - the sources consulted included books, journal articles, reports, policy documents and professional discourse. The search criteria focused on the following key concepts; excellence, quality, value, participation, engagement, involvement and taking part.
- Survey of National Association of Local Government Arts Officers (Nalgao³) - this comprised of a self-completion questionnaire to provide an insight into the level of impact both excellence and participation directives are having on local authority officers.
- Survey of National Campaign for the Arts (NCA⁴) Members - this self-completion questionnaire was devised to evaluate the extent to which these directives are influencing practitioners and arts professionals.
- Focus Group - involving a self-selected group of Nalgao members to explore in-depth concepts of excellence and participation, the tensions arising and potential solutions.
- Interviews - to investigate the themes for analysis from a national perspective, testimony was secured from the Director of Culture at the DCMS and the Director of Public Engagement at Arts Council England. A structured approach was used to explore excellence and participation from an individual, operational and organisational viewpoint and ascertain the extent to which these imperatives are influencing decision making.

³ For further information about Nalgao visit www.nalgao.org

⁴ For further information about NCA visit www.artscampaign.org.uk

4.1 Research Framework

In order to provide a rigorous research framework and ensure validity of findings both quantitative and qualitative methodologies were used to supplement the literature review. This methodological triangulation enabled the researcher to evaluate, synthesise and corroborate the data and multiple viewpoints expressed during the study.

Denzin and Lincoln (1998) uphold triangulation as an alternative to validation explaining:

‘The combination of multiple methods, empirical materials, perspectives and observers in a single study is best understood, then, as a strategy that adds rigour, breadth and depth to any investigation’ (pp4)

Primary data was initially collected using purposive sampling in order to test the research question that tensions exist for local authority practitioners in demonstrating excellence and striving to increase participation. This was achieved by selecting an existing sample group with the required characteristics in order to ensure the usefulness of resulting data.

Survey research is widely regarded as being inherently quantitative and, whilst qualitative methods are deemed by De Vaus (1985, pp5) ‘too reliant on subjective interpretations of researchers and being incapable of replication’, quantitative survey research is, he claims, well suited to providing the factual ‘hard evidence’.

A survey was deemed as the most appropriate research instrument because the subject under investigation is inherently politically sensitive and the anonymity provided enabled respondents the ability to express their personal viewpoint.

These findings were cross-referenced with a similar data gathering exercise of opinions of artists and arts organisations. This enabled the researcher to gain an understanding of the key issues from a practitioner perspective.

The topic was further explored in a self-selecting semi-structured focus group drawn from the purposive sample. Bryman (2008) recognises focus group research as less artificial than many other methods, emphasising the advantage of group interaction.

In order to establish the relevance of excellence from a national policy perspective, testimony was obtained through interviews with a high level civil servant and senior strategic officer from Arts Council national office.

Semi-structured interviews have the advantage of generating a wealth of qualitative data and can generate deep insights (Arksey & Knight 1999). They enable the interviewer to follow a specific agenda, probe responses and seek further elaboration, whilst also allowing the informant the scope to 'answer questions in terms of what they see important' (pp7).

This research method provided unique insights into the centrality of excellence in DCMS thinking and enabled the researcher to access information relating to the tools being developed by the Arts Council to measure the quality of experience and their planned programme to bolster engagement.

Whilst generalisations can be made about the wider research population, these findings are limited however by virtue of the fact that the views can only be accurately attributed to the research sample. The application of individual research methods is described in greater detail below.

4.2 Review of the literature

The literature review comprised of a critical evaluation of relevant texts and provides a theoretical context for the research. The review yielded considerable material that could be classified as professional debate and the researcher was able to extract significant evidence to support the premise of tensions between prescriptive participation targets and aspirations for excellence.

However the search highlighted a paucity of previous academic research conducted within a specific local authority context. Therefore it is anticipated that this research project will make a valuable contribution to the field.

This secondary data has been reviewed collectively and it has been noted that some sources conclude partially or exhibit bias.

4.3 Survey of Nalgao Members

Nalgao is the national association of local government arts officers and its purpose is to champion and support local arts of all kinds, including professional, amateur and voluntary provision.

The survey (Appendix 1) comprised of a self-completion questionnaire to provide the researcher with an insight into the level of influence both excellence and participation directives are having on local authority officers. It was administered online using Survey Monkey⁵ and circulated electronically to allow the researcher to cover as wide a geographic area as possible. The disadvantage of using this method is that the researcher has

⁵ Survey Monkey is a straightforward web-based tool that enables the creation of professional surveys

no control over the respondent's interpretation of the question, nor has the ability to probe a reply.

The survey featured a series of ten questions designed to gauge awareness of the excellence debate, determine the impact of this directive, identify systems used for evidencing both excellence and participation outcomes, ascertain whether tensions exist in aspiring to achieve both agendas and establish the barriers in achieving excellence of local authority arts provision. The questions were constructed to test theoretical assumptions and included factual and opinion questions of both an open and closed nature.

There are 418 members of Nalgao, as membership is also open to organisations or individuals working in the creative sector. The survey was particularly targeted at the 283 individual local authorities who subscribe. In order to validate the exercise and draw robust conclusions a minimum of 10% return was anticipated from local authority officers. Whilst a reduced return of 18 completed surveys provides indicative insights, it is acknowledged as a limitation in the process.

This primary data was used to inform the subsequent phase of research and shaped the structure of the focus group questions.

4.4 Survey of NCA Members

The National Campaign for the Arts (NCA) is an independent campaigning organisation that aims to provide a united voice for the arts. With 171 individual members and 330 organisations across the UK, NCA produces research and scrutinises government policy alerting its members to changes that may impact on the arts.

The NCA is keen to present the case for the arts as intrinsically valuable in addition to acknowledging the numerous instrumental economic, regenerative, educational and social benefits and responded to both the Arts Council England debate on public value and the consultation process that resulted in McMaster formulating conclusions for his highly influential review.

Although a significant number of the Arts Council's Regularly Funded Organisations were also involved in McMaster's original review, the purpose of this survey was to gauge the level of awareness of subsequent directives and discern the impact of resulting policy changes. It was hoped that the response would provide fresh perspectives from a practitioner's point of view.

The content for a self-completion questionnaire was drafted working closely with Edwina Vine, a 'peach placement'⁶ at NCA, who has been tasked with making recommendations for ways in which their members can develop a better working relationship with local authorities. It was intended that the questions for this survey would replicate the earlier local authority arts officer survey in order to produce a comparable data set. However, the NCA felt it would be necessary to operationalise the enquiry into a slightly different scale of measures in order to construct questions that could be easily understood by respondents. One such refinement was to test respondent's attitudes using a five-point Likert scale, the advantage of which was to allow more possibilities for a complex set of attitudes.

In order to draw robust conclusions a minimum of 10% return was anticipated. Whilst a reduced return of 21 completed surveys adds to the body of research data, there is an issue regarding representativeness and it is acknowledged as a statistical limitation.

⁶ The Cultural Leadership Programme offers a range of placements across the cultural and creative industries for emerging and mid-career leaders, encouraging 'learning through doing'. www.culturalleadership.org.uk

4.5 Focus Group

To further explore issues arising from the online survey of Local Authority Arts Officers the researcher facilitated an Open Space Forum on 8th October 2008 at the Nalgao conference in Blackpool. The Open Space Forum is an integral component of the annual Nalgao conference, offering delegates the opportunity to discuss ideas and concerns, consider new ways forward and enlist the support of others.

The Open Space Forum enabled the researcher to take advantage of an established formula to obtain a sample of self-selected practitioners with an interest in the proposed subject. It also helped to ensure participation by local authority officers working across a widespread geographical area.

The aim of this session was to:

- Consider the relevance of excellence to local authority arts officers
- Identify the extent to which this concept is influencing processes, practice or programming
- Explore the barriers to achieving excellence.
- Enable the researcher to pursue emerging issues and inform recommendations

The focus group session lasted for 45 minutes and attracted 18 delegates from a variety of working backgrounds; amongst those represented were local authority arts officers, senior cultural managers, Arts Council England delegates, individual artists, arts organisations and a representative from the Carnegie Foundation.

A handout detailing the McMaster definition of excellence and national indicator definition of participation were distributed to the group to

contextualise the discussion. And a series of semi-structured questions aligned to the survey content were posed with the aim of stimulating debate.

4.6 Interviews

Focused interviews were conducted via telephone separately with Mick Elliot, Director of Culture at the DCMS and David Brownlee, Director of Public Engagement at Arts Council England. The availability of these key contributors dictated that the interviews were conducted via telephone.

The DCMS provides funding for the arts in England, sets arts policy and supports arts based initiatives, often in collaboration with other government departments.

Arts Council England is the national development agency for the arts and between 2008 and 2011 will invest in excess of £1.6 billion of public money from the government and the National Lottery to create artistic experiences that enrich people's lives.

The aim of both these interviews was to

- Explore concepts of both excellence and participation.
- Investigate how these influence DCMS/Arts Council decision-making
- Enable the researcher to pursue emerging issues from previous focus groups/surveys
- Help inform recommendations

Sapsford & Jupp (1996) highlight the importance of controlling the interview in a non-directive manner in order to preserve the naturalism of a semi-structured method. This better enables the researcher to engage the informant. Conscious of this and the point made by May (2001) that there is a tendency to provide an official response reflecting how the organisation ought to appear in terms of the rhetoric of its own image, the researcher

sought to develop a rapport with the individuals being interviewed. To a certain extent this resulted in a willingness to enter into a dialogue that transcended official representation, providing insightful personal perspectives.

4.7 Methodological Limitations

The following methodological limitations apply to the chosen research methods:

Surveys - Belson (1986) highlights a number of reasons that may invalidate survey reliability when the questioning relates to peoples behaviour and opinions. These include the respondent failing to interpret the question in the way intended by its designer and 'question testing' (pp29) is suggested as a filter method for increased response reliability. Another danger that would undoubtedly impact on the survey data is the inclusion of leading, loaded or suggestive questions.

To reduce these limitations the wording of both surveys were tested by respondents from the sample groups and refined following feedback.

Focus Groups - the method affords less control than individual interviews and a balance must be struck between how involved the facilitator ought to be and the extent to which the prompt questions ought to influence discussion. This is particularly pertinent when an explicit set of research questions need to be explored.

Other limitations include; the volume of data arising from a rich discussion can pose a problem for analysis, focus group recordings are prone to inaudible elements affecting transcription and also large groups of participants have a tendency for two or more to speak at the same time.

The researcher adopted the remedy suggested by Krueger (1998) to tackle over-zealous contributors and actively encourage a range of contributions.

Telephone Interviews – Whilst availability of the key informants precluded face to face interviews, the limitations of a telephone interview should be noted. Of particular relevance is the point made by Bryman (2008) that the interviewer cannot engage in observation and is therefore unable to respond to unease, puzzlement or other expressions that would naturally prompt clarification or elaboration of the question.

4.8 Ethics Statement

This research project will be informed by adhering to the guidelines contained within Liverpool John Moores University Code of Good Practice in Research.

Objectivity will be preserved by virtue of the fact that practitioners completing the two surveys and/or participating in the focus group have self-selected. The anonymity and confidentiality of individuals has been maintained during these phases of the research as contributions are not attributed.

Whilst anonymity has not been afforded in the interview phase, the respondents have been fully informed of the nature and purpose of the research, made aware that transcripts would be made of the interview recording and given informed consent.

5 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

5.1 The Rhetoric of Quality

When Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport James Purnell commissioned Sir Brian McMaster to undertake a review that considered how public subsidy could best support excellence in the arts in July 2007, he cannot have foreseen the extent to which its recommendations would impact on local government, influencing policy and causing shock waves as officers sought to interpret his recommendations into practice.

Admittedly the review involved artists, directors, curators, producers and administrators from a wide variety of art forms; however there was one glaring omission, local authorities were not invited to join the debate despite being key stakeholders and significant funders of the arts.

McMaster's review draws upon the Arts Debate findings, the public value enquiry conducted by Arts Council England, and the conclusions are unsurprisingly symbiotic in so much as what the public value the most is excellence and innovation in art.

Yet in a report summarising the findings of the Arts Debate, Bunting (2007) makes a clear distinction between the various interpretations of quality, acknowledging that for members of the public this relates largely to 'quality of experience', whereas arts professionals are likely to emphasise the 'quality of product' and the wider stakeholder group, concerned that activity meets objectives, will refer to 'quality of project'.

McMaster exhorts innovation and risk-taking as integral components of excellence and in summary to a sparsely worded rumination on these qualities he offers the following scant recommendation:

'I recommend that innovation and risk-taking be at the centre of the funding and assessment framework for every organisation, large or small'

This, despite its brevity, has resulted in a change to the whole funding landscape.

It is evident that the McMaster review poses a challenge in terms of balancing a judgment-led process, as recommended for cultural agencies, with the existing measurement-led process prescribed for local authorities. Participation is clearly an objective that can be measured, whereas excellence is a quality that needs to be judged. But who should be the arbiter of quality?

Cutting through the range of metaphors and similes used by Dewey (1934) to illustrate the process of having an 'esthetic' (sic) experience it seems that fulfilment plays a key role. This is achieved by virtue of the arts ability to provide instances of completeness 'demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences'. Dewey also offers opinion on the nature of value, advising the wise critic to base comments on 'objective traits' rather than 'values in the sense of excellent or poor'.

The very subjective nature of experience would suggest it needs to be judged at many levels and from a variety of perspectives. Peer review and self-evaluation as suggested by McMaster may offer minimal bureaucracy, but without the involvement of the public lack transparency.

Academic Susannah Eckersley in her policy review (2008) condemns McMasters' report summarising that in her opinion many recommendations are 'contradictory or impractical'. She singles out self-assessment as particularly problematic claiming the lack of a clear standard would merely 'serve to burden organisations with targets that may be impossible to fulfil'.

Stepping into the fray a number of cultural commentators have stoked the debate; Editor of *Arts at the Heart*, the Nalgao magazine, Paul Kelly (2008) asserts

‘No-one in their right mind would say we don’t want the arts to be excellent.

It’d be a bit like saying you don’t want your child to do well at school’.

But he points out that McMaster makes no mention of how the participation agenda dovetails with his recommendations for excellence.

Sue Isherwood, the Executive Officer adds

‘the problem words are ‘risk-taking’ on the whole local authorities are risk adverse. The right to fail is a very hard one to sell to councillors as well’

An observation with which many local authority officers will concur.

Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, is however more intrepid. In a document that sets out priorities in the run up to 2012, Johnson firmly supports McMaster’s emphasis on excellence and risk-taking

“For culture to flourish and for people to be creative, we need to be brave with funding and bold in our vision” (foreword to *Cultural Metropolis* 2008)

Writing in response to McMaster’s recommendations Francois Matarasso (2008) suggests an alternative imperative for the cultural sector, ‘what really needs to be excellent is the conversation we have about culture’ and for that to happen the dialogue needs to be more inclusive, engaging beyond the limits of McMaster's select consultees.

Professional discourse continues to grow with new groups forming to challenge perceived dogma. The New Culture Forum⁷ is one such example of people who work in the media and cultural arenas, and amongst other aims are seeking to ‘promote a new flowering of excellence in the arts, motivated by aesthetic honesty, not box-ticking or political indoctrination.’

⁷ www.newcultureforum.org.uk

Despite following hot on the heels of McMaster, the improvement strategy *A Passion for Excellence* (2008) aimed at local authority leaders is singularly unhelpful in this enquiry. This is because 'excellence' is a semantic red herring and used purely to refer to service improvements, as opposed to the quality of the artistic activity. The framework for improvement has a self-assessment focus, making reference to *Arts at the Strategic Centre* (2007) and clearly linking to increasing participation through the National Indicator set. Neither document includes any reference to tools for measuring quality of outcome or the intrinsic value of the arts as one of the key features of model local authority provision.

5.2 Democratising the Arts

Labour's first Arts Minister Jennie Lee (1965) is often upheld as evidence of welfare reformist thinking for her attempts to widen the range of arts supported and decentralise decision making and funding. But Lee stopped short of advocating a cultural democracy that allowed groups to develop their own cultural forms.

Furthermore, Henry (1993) interprets the organisational transition from CEMA⁸ to a London-centric Arts Council in the early 1960's as abandonment of the post war reformist policies of the Welfare State. He accuses the government of paternalism in its attempt to improve the standards of provision, leading to a post-war elitism in which there was 'little credence given to 'cultural democracy' (p17)

John Tusa (2000) argues that access is not the most important indicator and merely distorts the fundamental activity, the absolute quality of the programme, without which there is little point increasing access for anybody.

⁸ Committee for Entertainment, Music and the Arts

Tusa claims that rather than supporting choice and democracy, those purveyors of mass culture actually reduce choice.

Following this line of argument in her personal essay, Tessa Jowell (2004) calls for a major sea-change by 'building excellence in all aspects of our cultural life. For everyone not just the privileged few elite'.

Holden (2008) uses the word 'democratise' to describe how the arts have been made popular by dumbing down and adopting gimmicks designed to have mass appeal. This has an interesting relevance for concepts of access, for he questions why democratising the arts with such tactics is often referred to in pejorative terms.

Holden also cautions that appealing to concepts of excellence or quality pose an inherent risk of acting 'as a cover for maintaining social superiority'. In terms of McMaster's recommendations, it is the implementation that Holden sees as crucial. He too is adamant that cultural excellence should not be solely determined by a group of peers, as this will result in a mere representation of the producers interest, instead the multiplicity of voices comprising the public ought to be admitted into the debate. This is because Holden perceives democracy within culture to be symptomatic of a wider issue – that of how we govern ourselves.

Bochel et al (2008) in reviewing participation within policy developments note New Labour's commitment to a greater degree of democratic participation, but claim that in reality within hierarchical governance this process merely incorporates users into the hierarchy so they become 'complicit in their own oppression'. (p207)

The egalitarian ideals of universalism and equality are already enshrined in law by Article 27 of the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights whereby

'Everyone has the right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community and to enjoy the arts'

But this decree relies on citizens having the ability to exercise that right. Herein lies the problem, with the exception of the provision of public libraries, there is no requirement for local authorities to provide arts services or support the arts with any funding.

Indeed as a discretionary service the arts are often under-resourced and susceptible to budget cuts, as evidenced in the local authority budget settlement survey conducted by Nalgao whereby 63% of responding authorities testified to a real term cut in arts provision for 2008/9.

It is useful to consider the notion of cultural entitlement at this juncture, which in simple terms would guarantee access to cultural benefits through law. Taking a cue from this legislation Demos⁹ contributed to the thinking with a report on *The Right to Make Art* (2004) Hewison and Holden concluded that the main challenge was that of semantics,

"The current language of measurement fails because it is wedded to the collective not the individual, to the objective, not the subjective, and yet attempts to quantify the unquantifiable."

Cultural entitlement was also considered as part of the Welsh Arts Review (2006). It was deemed by the panel that there was a 'need to have a minimum entitlement delineated' and although it was agreed that 'the arts must be differentiated from other cultural needs', at the time of writing rhetoric has not delivered results.

In January 2006 a Culture Bill looked set to enshrine the rights of access to the arts for everyone in Scotland, through placing a statutory obligation on

⁹ Demos is an independent research organisation with a global perspective on policy challenges - www.demos.co.uk

local authorities to provide all citizens with access to cultural opportunities within their own community.

The future of the Draft Bill now looks uncertain; following changes in the Holyrood administration the high profile cultural pledge has encountered an obstacle in the form of Culture Minister Linda Fabiani who told the Sunday Herald she has an aversion to 'legislation for legislation sake'. Demonstrating that there is a difference between general support for the concept and surmounting the political machinations to instigate a system capable of delivering such high ideals.

5.3 The Policy of Participation

It is useful to first reflect upon the forces behind an increased focus on participation and engagement, Gray (2007) offers a useful summary;

“Cultural participation is a concept which has risen rapidly on the global political agenda in recent years. This rise has been driven by an increased emphasis upon the use of culture as an instrumental tool in the attainment of non-cultural goals and objectives”

When the Arts Council launched *The Arts Debate* in October 2006, the first in the organisations history, it was heralded by many as a praiseworthy exercise in public involvement. However, in comparison to the frequency and depth with which many local authority arts services engage their audiences it could equally be perceived as a long overdue conversation with the public and belated tokenism in response to the growing central government emphasis on participation.

This piece of qualitative research, which gathered the views of over 1,500 individuals and organisations, led Bunting (2007) to conclude that a staggering 84% of people (50 million) rarely attend an arts event and that

there existed 'a strong sense among many members of the public of being excluded from something that they would like to be able to access'. This suggests that access in terms of the availability of cultural offer is not preventing participation; rather some individuals feel alienated or lack relevant cultural opportunities.

Informed by these findings the Arts Council launched its new plan *Great art for everyone 2008-2011*. Shrewdly combining both concepts of excellence and participation in the title, it is however surprising to note that 'taking part in the arts', a priority in their previous plan (2006), is no longer a key development target.

Keen to tackle accusations that excellence equates to elitism, McMaster claims that 'excellent art is by definition for, and relevant to absolutely everyone'. Noting the prevalence of 'not for me syndrome' and in direct contradiction to his earlier words, McMaster then acknowledges that 'to be excellent, the arts must be relevant'. Herein lies a further problem in as much as supporting artists to 'provoke, to aggravate and, at times, to anger' may not be wholly compatible with encouraging a more meaningful connection with those already disengaged members of the public.

Matarasso (2008) believes that McMaster's definition is not wrong, but it is limited. He highlights the importance of recognising that people's experience of cultural excellence is not confined to passive consumption, but rather how people subjectively respond to art. As such, he too is of the opinion that 'Excellence is not just subjective, but also relative'.

Taking Part is a continuous survey of cultural engagement commissioned by DCMS and Arts Council England that provides useful figures on levels of engagement in the arts on a national and regional basis, but the first summary (Bunting et al 2007) offered little insights into local participation.

Thus the purpose of including questions to determine the level of cultural engagement in the Active People survey was to gain a statistically reliable local data set. However, many people do not immediately identify the outdoor events they attend as arts activities so there is a real danger of under-reporting.

Bunting et al (2007) pose a most pertinent conundrum for public funders; that of the need to support 'emerging, popular, 'democratic' forms of arts experiences' (p6) to counter disengagement. Bold notions of investing in carnival, contemporary music and electronic art are brandished, but it is worth noting the report precedes the revival of excellence as a panacea for engagement.

In July 2008 the DCMS and Arts Council England commissioned a report exploring the scope and nature of the amateur arts movement. The report *Our Creative Talent* was prompted by the PSA3¹⁰ advisory board, following advice from the Voluntary Arts Network¹¹ (VAN) that in order to engage with the amateur arts movement DCMS would need to better understand the barriers to participation and what kind of support at local level would be necessary to meet targets.

The headline figure was an astonishing 9.4 million participate in voluntary and amateur arts groups. Yet the report cited the need for increased profile, voice and recognition of the sector with improved networks and regular high level advocacy meetings to improve understanding at ACE and DCMS of the amateur movement.

¹⁰ Public Service Agreement 3 target to increase the take-up of cultural and sporting opportunities by adults and young people from priority groups

¹¹ VAN provide information and training to those who participate in the voluntary arts sector
For further information about VAN visit www.voluntaryarts.org.uk

A manifesto for supporting public participation in the arts and crafts is pending development by NCA, VAN, Nalgao and the National Disability Arts Forum. This national collaboration would seem to offer an opportunity to ensure engagement outcomes link through to NI11, but the draft definition for participate is 'doing' and does not include the passive audience or viewer. This oversight will seriously impede the steering groups' legacy objective to

"Ensure the outcomes from the implementation of such a manifesto can be linked to local Government performance indicators"

A similar position statement defining participation as 'taking an active role' has also been drawn up by Voluntary Arts Wales. Thus it seems that not only is there dissent on the definition of excellence, but disagreement is equally rife around what it means to participate.

5.4 The Transformational Power of the Arts

At the heart of McMaster's review is a committed belief in the transformational power of the arts, and this is never more evident than in his definition of excellence

'excellence in culture occurs when an experience affects and changes an individual' McMaster (2008)

In their critical analysis of claims that the arts possess transformational power Belifore and Bennett (2008) chart the debate from a historical perspective. Noting contemporary political concerns regarding the need to find a new language to articulate how the arts affect individuals, they argue that today's policymakers need to reconnect with the language and arguments used by the luminaries of ancient times to measure the impact of the arts.

Matarasso (1997) makes a distinction between the experiences of participants and those of passive audiences in his report on the social

impact of the arts. He cites a range of benefits on a personal level, stopping short of transformational terminology. He confronts the issue that engagement in the arts carries a risk, albeit small, of producing negative outcomes. The antidote is well planned projects executed to professional standards and Matarasso indicates the role of first-rate local authority leadership is essential. This recognition that management good practice is an essential component for high calibre engagement is doubtless a position with which many will concur.

Jowell (2004) testifies to the DCMS belief in the power of cultural experiences, claiming they offer the 'key to real transformation' this suggests she personally supports the notion of intrinsic value. However there remains a need to demonstrate to the central government bean-counters that quantifiable transformation has occurred and Jowell poses the rhetorical question 'How in going beyond targets, can we best capture the value of culture' (pp13)

In a collection of essays that consider the role of arts in society Hewitt (2004) refers to the 'inherent, transformative power of the arts'. His concern is that in seeking to measure value through 'the mechanical, the numerical and the 'bean-counting'' the magic may be missed. Hewitt challenges researchers to establish what constitutes a transformative experience in order to capture the essential quality. However, as the individual conditions and circumstances will vary, the research found little evidence of progress made to define the elusive essence.

Indeed Belifore & Bennett (2007) in seeking the 'determinants of impact' arising from an aesthetic experience question whether any meaningful generalizations can be made due to 'the multidimensionality, the subjectivity and the unpredictability of encounters with the arts'.

A more positive prognosis is forthcoming from the USA; in a report commissioned by fourteen university partners keen to understand how they could measure the extent that audiences were transformed during live performances, Brown & Novak (2007) created a metric to articulate a range of contributory factors.

Regular cultural participation remains far from universal. In terms of engagement, adherents to transformational experiences are drawn overwhelmingly from the educated ranks and those higher up the social status scale (Bunting et al 2008).

Le Grand (2003) enquires why social exclusion is a problem and poses the case for voluntary social exclusion, when an individual chooses to exclude him or herself from wider society. This controversial viewpoint offers a counterbalance, albeit with deleterious potential, particularly when considering the 'contingency value' of the Arts.

Bunting et al (2008) disagree and despite evidence that non-engagement or self-exclusion is in some circumstances a life-style choice, advocate that arts policymakers have a duty to intervene by seeking ways to shift the attitude of 84% of the population, who currently 'do little or anything' or participate in the arts only 'now or then'.

5.5 Revolt Against Measurement

In a subsequent report (1999) Matarasso tackles the precarious position of the arts in finding suitable measures that truly reflect their contribution to the quality of life. Despite being produced a decade earlier and, by Matarasso's own admission, offering 'little more than a sketch of what general indicators might mean to the cultural sector', it contributes to the current debate about performance by offering a rudimentary framework of indicators for measuring cultural vitality.

But there is dissent among cultural theorists; Sara Selwood editor of *Cultural Trends* (2002) says 'collecting statistics to prove the 'use' of the arts has been largely useless'.

The considerable influence Matarasso has had on cultural policy is evident in the content of the *Arts Performance Checklist* (ACE 2006). This self-completion checklist results in a percentage scored measurement based around ten themes and the final stage is external validation by ACE. For authorities who have recently undertaken Comprehensive Performance Assessment it would admittedly be a relatively simple process, as much of the required evidence is the same; although this begs the question as to the value and purpose of embarking on a further navel gazing exercise. This self-assessment framework is now largely obsolete and will shortly be superseded by the Single Improvement Tool arising from *A Passion for Excellence*.

It is interesting to contextualise the multiplicity of assessment and measurement inflicted upon local authorities with public perception of the issue. Bunting (2007) claims that the Arts Debate was not dominated by a preoccupation with the polarised values of 'art for art's sake' versus tangible social outcomes. Whilst acknowledging some tensions arose in discussing intrinsic and instrumental value, she summarises as follows;

'in reality these simplistic divides are not recognised by, or relevant to, the majority of people' (pp7)

Furthermore the response below to the Arts Debate also suggests that the importance the public place on measurement is of less significance,

"You need to take some risks and not measure everything – measurement can inhibit creativity" (cited by ACE *Great art for everyone 2008-2011*)

Tusa (2000) lambastes the 'massification' of culture, whereby the only activities that matter are those where the results or effects can be counted or measured. Criticising the obsession with measurable performance

indicators and a value system that justifies by numbers rather than quality or excellence, Tusa questions whether

‘the imperatives of the marketplace (are) driving the judgement of values into wholly unacceptable - because quantifiable - directions.’ (p89)

The answer to this during subsequent years is unfortunately affirmative and evidence based policy making is now rife.

Equally adamant that ‘The value of culture cannot be expressed with statistics’ Holden (2004) encapsulates the problem, which he feels is ‘particularly acute in the relationship between local authorities and the cultural organisations they fund’.

This does not resolve the issue of how, without measurement, consensus about the value of the arts can be gained. Leadbeater (2005) cites valuing ‘intangible assets’ as one of the key 21st century challenges for arts organisations and counsels that ‘Art is not made good or bad by the number of public service targets it hits’.

Holden (2004) prescribes plagiarising the language of other sectors, such as anthropology and environmentalism, to synthesise a whole new set of values. But will articulating in borrowed terms not further shroud the worth of an arts experience? Demos colleague Hewison (2006) contributes to the debate with a dire warning that without clear terms of reference for cultural value, it will ‘not enjoy the same political legitimacy afforded to education, health, law and order, defence or even sport’.

The futility of the endeavour is underlined by Belifore & Bennett (2007) who conclude from the investigations that they undertook that,

‘it is not possible to develop a rigorous protocol for the assessment of the impacts of the aesthetic experience that can be boiled down to a handful of bullet-points and a user-friendly ‘evaluation toolkit’ (p263)

It was therefore refreshing when James Purnell (2007) declared in his first speech as Secretary of State,

‘whilst targets were probably necessary in 1997, to force a change of direction in some parts of the arts world. But now, ten years later, we risk idolising them’.

This speech summarises Purcell’s ambition to ‘keep the passion and throw away the package of targetolatory’ and sets the context in which he invited Sir Brian McMaster, former Director of the Edinburgh Festival, to make recommendations on how the government could best support the arts and promote excellence in a way that ‘does not stifle with unnecessary targets’.

Yet despite such rhetoric there exists a whole raft of technical notes and supplementary briefings produced by the DCMS, DCLG and Arts Council to support the National Indicator definition set, which is a purely numerical measurement.

6 RESEARCH FINDINGS

6.1 National Arts Policy

6.1.1 Insights from the top

As part of the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review settlement, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport agreed a new set of strategic objectives designed to complement the Public Service Agreements. The two objectives with relevance to this research for 2008-2011 are:

- Opportunity: Encourage more widespread enjoyment of culture, media and sport
- Excellence: Support talent and excellence in culture, media and sport

Mick Elliot, Director of Culture at the DCMS, has responsibility for advising on and implementing government policy for the arts. During an Open Dialogues¹² session in Liverpool on 15th September 2009, he highlighted a need for information, evidence and anecdotes to better make the case for culture,

‘This ought to comprise of economic value, return on investment and social impact evidence, not fluffy stuff’.

This could be interpreted as a preference for measurement that demonstrates the instrumental benefits as opposed to the intrinsic value.

The DCMS website states

‘We aim to improve the quality of life for all through cultural and sporting activities, **to support the pursuit of excellence** and to champion the tourism, creative and leisure industries’.

And at the outset of the interview Elliott declared allegiance to McMaster’s definition of excellence with the endorsement ‘it’s about a change of perspective or a life-changing sort of experience’.

¹² *Leadership Realities*, an Open Dialogues session as part of the IJMU programme

He qualified excellent work as being internationally renowned or recognised, challenging, risk-taking and innovative. But did not perceive it to be an alternative or separate from participation adding 'engagement is the other side of the excellence coin'. Elliot feels that

'People don't want to suffer the inadequate and the mundane; they are excited and engaged with the excellence in art and culture'.

A further question was posed in order to gauge how influential the pursuit of excellence is in current DCMS policy-making and perhaps unsurprisingly Elliot confirmed it to be 'a central plank' in the DCMS agenda. Whilst grants have already been allocated for the period up to 2011, Elliot indicated that measures would be put in place to judge excellence and this judgement would affect future decision-making. His more immediate concern however, was how the notion of excellence can protect the infrastructure of arts and culture in the UK during the economic downturn.

Elliot's professional experience has led him to concur that artistic excellence is also the best way to encourage wider and more meaningful public engagement with the arts. He is of the opinion that 'people don't engage in a sustained way with safe programming', but that it is essential to put on the very best, most innovative 'and create a sense of excitement around the work'.

This view is borne out in the summary findings of arts debate whereby many members of the public and some arts professional used words such as 'excitement' 'surprise' and 'enrichment' in referring to a quality experience.

Given the recent interest in progressing cultural entitlement in both Scotland and Wales, Elliot was invited to consider whether making arts provision statutory would provide a solution to democratising the arts.

Elliot's opinion on this long standing debate was influenced by a concern that statutory provision can mean a focus on minimum baseline standards, rather than stretch and improvement.

This is a concern shared by panel members of the Wales Arts Review (2006), who feared that regardless of recommending legislation to make cultural entitlement mandatory in local authority provision, it may still be possible to satisfy the requirement without improving arts provision in a poorly served area.

Challenged as to the likelihood that the imposition of a statutory requirement would result in a retraction of provision to a minimum standard in areas where the importance of arts has already been established, Elliot acknowledged there is also a compelling argument that it could result in cultural gain with provision in places that do not currently enjoy widespread access.

Such concerns may be pertinent in the current climate, and given the competing pressures on local authority finance, Elliot felt it more important to champion the value of the arts in terms of its contribution to local communities, economic development and regeneration. And, in a cunning attempt to balance the instrumental case for the arts with the intrinsic value inherent in the excellence debate, Elliot concluded that to achieve outcomes the quality of arts engagement has to be excellent.

Asked how public sector support for the arts could better encourage excellence. Elliot advised this would best be achieved through building trust with those organisations prepared to support risk. Although he felt it important not to micro-manage, but rather invest in the leadership of those trusted organisations to deliver excellence, to the extent of supporting their right to fail in pursuit of this goal.

Elliot was slightly dismissive of the role of local authorities stating they could not 'design the excellence', that could only come from the talent and leadership in those institutions. This of course fails to acknowledge the significant role of local authorities in the delivery of arts provision.

Asked whether local authorities ought to have been involved in the McMaster consultation, Elliot felt unable to defend the decision, a reasonably comfortable admission as the report was commissioned prior to his appointment.

In summary Elliot could not foresee any tensions arising between targets seeking to increase attendance and the pursuit of excellence. Although he acknowledged the dilemma, when presented with quotes obtained during the survey of local authority officers suggesting that in order to meet their participation targets some authorities were resorting to safe programming, he maintained that participation without excellence was unsustainable, believing audiences would shun 'second rate, mundane or routine activity'.

6.1.2 Arms length policy-making

The relationship between DCMS and the Arts Council is one of 'arms length' principle, whereby support for the arts is achieved through this quasi-autonomous body.

However, during an interview Sir Christopher Fraying, Chair of the Arts Council, exposed this eroded arrangement as no longer guaranteeing independence to The Stage reporter Austin (2005)

'The principle of arm-length funding has been undermined to the extent that ACE is now considered merely an extension of Tessa Jowell's Department for Culture, Media and Sport'.

The Arts Council was set up in 1939 in a climate of welfare reform measures between the wars; its aim was to foster public morale via the provision of

high and popular arts. Yet the focus on promoting professional rather than amateur arts was evident from the outset and a corollary of this decision was the focus on excellence. Henry (1993) chronicles the interests of the Arts Council at this point

'to promote professional rather than amateur art.....to concentrate on excellence rather than participation' (p16)

Arts Council support for community arts between 1975-7 provoked debate; those in support argued that it would lead to 'participation in or appreciation of the high arts' (Henry 1993 p20) with other commentators identifying the social significance of community arts process as being more important. This culminated in a decision that all community arts funding would be devolved to the level of Regional Arts Associations.

Not until the Arts Council Annual Reports of the 1980's does their argument for retaining public subsidy move from a rational based on criteria relating to aesthetic standards and the promotion of access to a more instrumental appeal highlighting the economic importance of the arts (Myerscough 1988).

During an address to the Nalgao Conference in Blackpool October 08 Alan Davey, Chief Executive of the Arts Council, professed they wanted to 'champion audiences, who deserve not to be patronised' adding that 'historically excellence has always been at the core'. He also spoke about the 'false tension' and suggested the remedy was for local authorities to fund excellent art, but help people better engage with it.

Considering lack of funding was overwhelmingly identified as the key factor preventing excellence in local authority art provision in the survey of arts officers, this is an ill-informed and unrealistic solution.

6.1.3 Public engagement imperative

David Brownlee is currently Director of Strategic Partnerships at the Arts Council and, for a significant period last year, was also acting Director of Public Engagement. This National Office team deals with all aspects of attendance and participation in the arts, and Brownlee's particular remit is leading on engagement with external partners, including local government and the voluntary sector.

In outlining the strands of the Public Engagement Programme Brownlee highlighted the support available for authorities who have selected NI11 within their local area agreement. Having led the Arts Council's lobby to get 'Engagement in the Arts' within the national indicator set, he is now seeking ways to assist those areas in achieving the improvement target.

The regional ACE Northwest office is working in partnership with local authorities to create a number of Arts Engagement posts with the aim of significantly increasing the depth and quality of engagement. Asked whether this was a pilot for a national scheme, Brownlee advised that there is no commitment that this will be rolled out across the country, however if it has a statistically significant impact it may inform future planning.

For Brownlee participating in the arts also has to be an excellent experience, and he firmly believes that quality should be at the heart of everything ACE promote. But his personal definition of excellence is far from elitist,

'its not necessarily about great opera.....it could be participating in a community project or within an amateur arts experience".

When reminded of the DCMS (2008) statistics on voluntary engagement that although 9.4 million people participate in amateur arts these groups receive less than 2% of mainstream arts funding, Brownlee cast aspersions on the methodology used to obtain the figures. However, he firmly supported other

conclusions from *Our Creative Talent*, in particular the claim that a significant amount of excellent art takes place in non-funded circumstances adding,

“This kind of false border between what is funded and is therefore excellent and what is not funded and is therefore not excellent is something I don’t think anybody senior in the Arts Council would go along with”

Brownlee was also of the opinion that the experience is subjective and when asked how influential excellence was in current funding decisions he seemed less committed to peer review admitting it would offer ‘probably a less democratic view of excellence in the arts’. Referring to a broader corporate drive towards public engagement, Brownlee hinted ‘we are looking at a big project around a wider range of voices influencing funding decisions’.

In terms of taking policy forward, and referring to the findings of the arts debate, Brownlee felt re-affirmation of the central mission ‘Great art for everyone’ would help to refocus the debate,

“It’s not just about engagement in the arts, it’s about engagement in quality arts and quality arts from the participants point of view.”

Asked to consider what prevents local authorities from achieving excellence in arts provision, Brownlee commented with pragmatism ‘The primary goals of a local authority are not to deliver great artistic experiences’ and observed that processes, resources and the space to think creatively may be hindrances, but he acknowledged that ‘a lot of local authorities do achieve excellence in arts provision’.

Brownlee’s empathy extended to acknowledging the tensions in balancing excellence and participation, and he perceived a ‘huge risk’ with NI11 candidly commenting that it is ‘about counting beans’ and recognising

“there is a temptation, given the massive targets that areas have got, to just get out there, get people engaged and try and hit the target figure, so that

when people answer the telephone they are saying they have engaged and it doesn't really matter what the quality was"

Brownlee felt this could be mitigated by the development of a tool to measure quality of experience, thus adding another dimension to the data, and was keen to discuss the Arts Council's progress. He seemed confident that through further research and comparison with other models, such as those used in broadcasting to measure the public value of programming, an approved method could be available within a couple of years.

6.2 Arts Provision and Local Government

6.2.1 The context of measurement

It is estimated that the average local authority arts service spend is just under £2.22 per capita (Nalgao 2008). However this paltry sum does not reflect the importance of local government arts provision with many authorities responsible for the operation and licensing of venues, producing a wide range of artistic events, commissioning public art, supporting voluntary, amateur and community arts initiatives and funding local arts organisations.

Local Area Agreements (LAA's¹³) set out the priorities for a local area agreed between central government, the local authority and other key partners. In England a single set of 198 national indicators have been agreed, which flow from the priorities identified for central and local government in the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review.

These indicators are intended to measure an areas' progress in delivering priority outcomes and each local area selects 35 targets that they intend to reshape services around. In addition to ensuring greater accountability to local people, one of the aims in developing this single set of indicators was

¹³ For more information on LAA's visit www.communities.gov.uk/localgovernment/

according to John Healey (2008) Minister for Local Government to 'reduce the burdens on local authorities'.

Local Authorities will in future be assessed by their performance against these agreed LAA priorities. This new approach is called Comprehensive Area Assessment and it will consider how well services are working to improve the quality of life for local people.

Data for indicator NI11 is reported on at single tier or unitary and county level. Good performance will be defined as a statistically significant increase in the percentage of adult population who have engaged in the arts at least three times in the past twelve months.

All areas will be measured on levels of engagement with the arts. At the time of undertaking this research, 39 of a potential 150 areas have also selected NI11 as a designated improvement target with an expectation to increase participation between 2.5%-6.1% from baseline to final assessment in October 2010 as detailed in the table below.

Localities with indicator NI 11			
County or Unitary Authority	Baseline estimate	Number in sample	% increase
Bedfordshire	41.8%	770	4.9%
Essex	43.5%	3,005	2.5%
Luton UA	37.9%	504	6.0%
Southend-on-Sea UA	45.1%	2,058	3.0%
Lincolnshire	45.0%	1,779	3.3%
Northamptonshire	44.8%	1,795	3.3%
Rutland UA	49.8%	2,026	3.1%
Croydon UA	44.3%	2,021	3.1%
Greenwich UA	46.5%	2,021	3.1%
Harrow UA	42.4%	2,033	3.0%
Hounslow UA	41.1%	2,044	3.0%

Lewisham UA	51.4%	514	6.1%
Waltham Forest UA	40.7%	2,029	3.0%
Darlington UA	42.1%	2,015	3.0%
Hartlepool UA	34.4%	2,012	2.9%
Newcastle upon Tyne UA	45.9%	509	6.1%
Northumberland	40.0%	2,001	3.0%
Stockton-on-Tees UA	38.0%	2,005	3.0%
Cumbria	42.7%	1,508	3.5%
Manchester UA	43.7%	505	6.1%
Oldham UA	37.4%	501	6.0%
Brighton and Hove UA	61.2%	2,013	3.0%
Kent	47.0%	3,006	2.5%
Milton Keynes UA	43.8%	2,002	3.1%
Wokingham UA	49.9%	2,045	3.1%
Bournemouth UA	44.7%	510	6.1%
Devon	49.2%	2,017	3.1%
Dorset	49.8%	2,034	3.1%
Somerset	47.7%	1,269	3.9%
Swindon UA	38.3%	2,003	3.0%
Torbay UA	40.1%	2,018	3.0%
Herefordshire UA	46.4%	2,023	3.1%
Shropshire	46.3%	2,015	3.1%
Barnsley UA	32.8%	2,022	2.9%
Bradford UA	35.5%	2,042	2.9%
Doncaster UA	31.9%	2,009	2.9%
East Riding UA	43.5%	2,028	3.1%
Leeds UA	37.1%	499	6.0%
North Yorkshire	47.3%	1,758	3.3%

(Table 1) Local Authorities with NI11 as an improvement target¹⁴

¹⁴ NI11 Baseline Data with propensity – Communities of Practice for Local Government
www.communities.idea.gov.uk

This data has been hailed by Arts Council England as the first ever statistically reliable local data on arts engagement and is derived from the Active People Survey.

6.2.2 Limitations and complexities

Engagement will only count if it has taken place in spare/leisure time and not as part of full time work, formal education or formal volunteering. Nor will it count if the activity takes place online or through digital mediums, which considering this is one the four development priorities for the Arts Council purportedly connecting audiences with the arts in new and exciting ways, could be considered a serious omission.

Concern was also expressed during the focus group session that the arts engagement did not need to occur in the locality of the person being surveyed. In this sense the findings could be challenged as they may not accurately reflect local arts provision at all, as some respondents will only access the arts whilst on holiday or visiting a large metropolis.

The survey was conducted as a telephone interview and the variance of the sample size is worth examining. The DCMS originally stated that a boost in minimum sample size from 500 to 2,000 interviews would be available to those top tier authorities that had selected NI11. However, Table 1 suggests that this was not achieved with a number of county authorities receiving well below the prescribed quantity; Somerset is particularly notable with a sample size of just 1,269.

All surveys are susceptible to a margin of error or confidence interval. Overall, it is claimed by the Arts Council that across the entire data set there is a 95% probability that this is an accurate reflection of the percentage of adult participation in the arts. Given that the fieldwork for the survey was conducted by Ipsos MORI this may be a legitimate claim. In undertaking

telephone surveys they use a method called random digit dialing (RDD) which uses arbitrarily generated, but area-specific, telephone numbers and for this reason it is the preferred method for telephone samples as ex-directory households are included thus not biasing the sample.

However, it could be argued that the sampling method is fundamentally flawed, as it is neither scientific nor impartial. Certainly as a method the data could not be replicated; the haphazard nature of telephone interviews using RDD despite the precautions taken, may still render the outcomes susceptible to non-response bias. For example, nonresponders may not have been contacted because they work multiple minimum-wage jobs.

A further complexity is added by virtue of the fact that the Arts Council have sought to conflate the outcomes of the survey with their newly developed segmentation modelling *Arts Audience Insights*¹⁵. From this they have produced a 'propensity to engage' adjunct to provide local authorities with an insight into how their area compares in relation to others. These projections take into account demographic and lifestyle features and with additional investment to integrate the data, a more sophisticated diagnostic tool for planning engagement campaigns could be developed.

6.2.3 Participation as a provision priority

Although a supplementary question in a survey conducted directly by Nalgao into local authority budget settlements (2008) concluded that 'There are a considerable number of responding officers who were not aware of their LAA's', 78% of respondents to the research survey stated that they are collecting data on participation. A further two authorities who are not currently collecting this data plan to commence once a mechanism has been established.

¹⁵ The segmentation divides English adults into 13 distinct groups and can provide insights into why different kinds of people engage with the arts, offering ideas for building audiences.

This indicates that for many Councils reporting an increase in attendance is a real priority; and for those where it is an agreed improvement target there may be a risk that influencing people's responses to the Active People telephone survey, through awareness raising tactics, takes precedence over actually improving the quality of arts provision.

Two thirds of Arts Officers answered Yes or Maybe when asked in the survey whether they were encountering or could foresee tensions arising between striving to increase participation and demonstrating excellence.

This concern was substantiated by feedback that included affirmation of a purely numerical focus in some areas; 'Temptation is for 'bums on seats' leading to 'safer' programming' to meet their participation targets. Indeed one concerned local authority officer reported

'we are even less likely to take risks or organise things that are innovative in case it doesn't appeal or attract the numbers that were required to meet their targets'.

The focus group provided an opportunity to examine this issue more thoroughly and 18 delegates took part in a lively debate, often disagreeing on core issues. Pertinent comments included;

NI11 as a target

"a great way of getting art into the authority when art hasn't been there before"

"the measuring system doesn't take account of how good the experience is. It's a crude bums on seats measurement"

"nobody gives a stuff about measuring the quality... your so called development service is an increasing numbers service"

"it seems to be more important that 50 people have a rubbish experience of the arts.....than 10 people have a fantastic time and want to keep going back to do more"

on chasing funding to deliver against other NI targets

“There is certainly a danger.....of compromising the arts to fit in with somebody else’s agenda”

of street arts

“there’s lots of people out so tick, tick, tick. So I know we are benefiting from that kind of emphasis on numbers”

6.3 The Pursuit of Excellence

6.3.1 Impact on local authority provision

In the 1950’s Arts Council Secretary General Bill Williams ‘few but roses’ ethos, resulted in a policy that concentrated resources upon centres of excellence. McMaster’s recommendations could therefore be interpreted as a revival of this vanguard.

His intentions were interpreted in a variety of ways by respondents to the local authority survey, with suspicion aired that ‘excellence is a bureaucrat’s word for opening the door to more measurement’. Indeed when asked whether artistic excellence was the best way to encourage wider and more meaningful public engagement with the arts only 16.7% (3) respondents gave a positive response and the enquiry generated the following comments;

“‘artistic excellence’ is far too subjective and possibly could be conceived as elitist”

“Excellence of process of the journey and excellence of the artwork”

“High quality yes, but activity must be designed appropriately to the audience first to get interest”

“.....there is no historical precedent for great moment in art being defined as ‘excellence’ - indeed, truly important artistic achievement can look clumsy and stumbling while opening up the potential of making it new”

To further explore whether local authority officers had been converted by the creed of excellence, focus group participants were provided with a handout detailing the definition McMaster used in his review and asked how this related to their working context.

The prevailing opinion was that local authorities are about getting people engaged and involved. Surveys and anecdotal feedback testifies that participants often have a great time, but as the NI measuring system does not take into account the quality of the experience, it would be difficult to discern whether the experience had 'affected and changed the individual' and therefore conform to excellent as defined by McMaster.

The role of amateur arts was also broached; it was mooted that members of an amateur dramatic society may well experience a personal transformation, however the artistic quality would be variable. One of the concerns was this debate was a retrograde step, reinvesting arts development with elitism and threatening to ignite unhelpful arguments around high art versus low art.

Whilst the survey of local authority arts officers revealed widespread awareness of the recommendations outlined by McMaster, 50% of respondents stated that the directive and ensuing debate have had no discernible effect on local authority programming, processes or practice.

However, 22% acknowledged a change in approach to artistic programming with a new focus on quality, diversity and internationalism.

In terms of internal processes, many local authorities already collect data to evidence public satisfaction with service provision and feedback suggests that McMasters recommendations will be influential, but what is now needed is guidance on gauging excellence.

Several local authority officers acknowledged a change in their professional practice, with examples given

- Greater use of peer review in managing partnership agreements
- Changes in recommendations made to local arts organisations

And in one case the McMaster review has been used to effect a change in focus for arts provision.

In terms of evidencing excellence, a high percentage of local authorities (44.4%) are already involving artists in the process or using peer review (27.8%), a familiar method favoured by Comprehensive Performance Assessment¹⁶ (CPA), to which many local authorities will have subjected their cultural services. In fact 14 of the 18 authorities responding to the survey stated that they had received a rating of either Good or Excellent in their most recent CPA inspection.


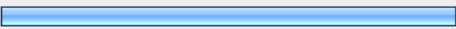
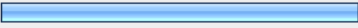
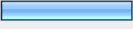
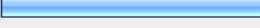
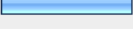
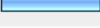

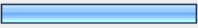

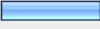
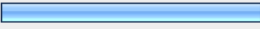


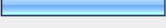
Viewing funded organisations work and observing governance of their boards, alongside reviewing both quantitative and qualitative feedback were cited as important factors in establishing and evidencing excellence. Only four local authorities are currently making assessment based on artistic risk-taking (22.2%) and three consider the level of artistic innovation (16.7%)

Although an earlier survey undertaken directly by Nalgao (2008) examined the proclivity amongst local authority officers to adopt performance management systems to gauge the quality of service, they found that only a small percent used *Arts at the Strategic Centre* and the majority (65%) had no system at all. This corresponds to the research survey, which found that none of the respondents used the Arts Council self-assessment tool as a preferred method for evidencing excellence and only two authorities continue to use the Arts Performance Checklist, also created by the Arts Council.

¹⁶ Further information on Comprehensive Performance Assessment can be accessed by visiting www.audit-commission.gov.uk

This may be due to the fact that these tools are soon to become obsolete and will be superseded by the Culture & Sport Improvement toolkit. However, the prospect of another system seems equally unpopular with only 24% of the 73 authorities who took part in the annual Nalgao survey confirming they planned to introduce this.

In considering the factors that prevent the achievement of excellence, the key issues identified by survey respondents were lack of funding along with lack of political aspiration.

8. What factors currently prevent the achievement of excellence in local authority arts provision? (tick all that apply)			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Not relevant to local authority arts provision		5.6%	1
Lack of funding		77.8%	14
Lack of political aspiration		61.1%	11
Focus on community/voluntary arts		22.2%	4
Local authorities are risk adverse		44.4%	8
Little interest in innovation		22.2%	4
Limited officer knowledge		16.7%	3
Limited access to touring opportunities due to location		11.1%	2
Fear of hostile reaction to new/challenging work		33.3%	6
Insufficient artistic diversity		11.1%	2
Paucity of international offer		0.0%	0
Minimal artistic involvement in decision-making		16.7%	3
Focus predominantly on tangible measures		44.4%	8
Lack of relevance to local communities served		22.2%	4
 Other (please specify)		27.8%	5
<i>answered question</i>			18

(Table 2) Factors preventing the achievement of excellence

The earlier cited observation by Nalgao Executive Officer Isherwood that local authorities are inherently risk adverse was born out in the survey with 44% citing this as a barrier to excellence. Equally problematic was a focus on tangible measures. Interestingly, whilst local authorities are often accused of defaulting to 'tried and tested' programmes or events that have already proved popular with local audiences, innovation and fear of reaction to new/challenging work were regarded as less significant factors.

6.3.2 Excellence from a practitioner's perspective

National Campaign for the Arts were invited to respond to McMaster's initial consultation and included in their recommendations, that the Government actively champion excellence, risk-taking and innovation in a non-bureaucratic way. However, whilst NCA welcomed the broad thrust of the final document, Director Louise de Winter confessed astonishment during a keynote speech at the Nalgao conference in October 08 at 'the influence and impact of something that is really rather scant'.

NCA has subsequently issued a positional statement calling for further clarification and examination of how McMaster's recommendations will translate into practice.

The research survey of NCA members demonstrates that only 38.1% of respondents felt able to subscribe to the McMaster definition of excellence, practitioners comments also revealed how contentious the very notion of excellence has become;

"It is ridiculous to pretend that bureaucrats or anyone else can define excellence in the arts or culture"

"Excellence is very subjective and is a problem to many arts organisations"

"I don't think we should define excellence in culture in a single sentence"

Furthermore, 42.9% of respondents were uncertain as to whether an increased focus on artistic excellence was the best way to encourage wider

and more meaningful public engagement in the Arts, with only a third wholly supportive of this approach.

Respondents expressed a range of concerns including;

“Have an issue with defining 'excellence in culture' and then striving to set 'excellence' as a target by which to measure achievement.

“.....excellence might be too big a description for public participation who may have a lower expectation which nevertheless is very creditable within a set of restrictions”

This is an interesting reflection, but it does not align with the summary of the arts debate whereby ‘it was widely agreed that quality and innovation are vital ingredients for the arts to be beneficial’ (2008 *What people want from the arts*)

Several respondents felt that arts education was more pivotal than excellence in striving to secure engagement and others indicated that advocacy, in terms of outlining the benefits derived from engaging in the arts, was essential to widening reach.

In focusing respondents reflections on the extent to which the excellence debate has resulted in a change of approach, it was evident that the ramifications have been far reaching.

- 68.4% testified that their approach to artistic programming had changed as a result.
- 68.4% had also changed their practice as an artist/arts organisation.
- 73.7% had increased their level of risk-taking and the same percentage had also chosen to focus more on innovation.

The most significant change for practitioners however, was in the process of evaluation with 78.9% of respondents stating affirmative and offering substantiations such as;

“I'm trying to set clearer benchmarks in order to measure and prove quality for the work”

It must be acknowledged that whilst McMasters' recommendations have been influential on DCMS and Arts Council thinking, translating into funding decisions that give excellence a new centrality, not all artists and arts organisations have chosen to seek ways in which to better demonstrate this quality. In fact 11 of the 21 respondents said they were not currently evidencing excellence, largely due to a focus on other priorities such as;

- Focus on increasing attendance figures – 47.6% (10)
- Instrumental social agendas such as healthcare taking precedence – 47.6% (10)
- Focus on community/voluntary arts – 33.3% (7)

There was similar subscription to the contributory factors preventing the achievement of excellence amongst the arts community as those identified in the survey of local authority officers with 42.9% (9) respondents citing lack of funding and 33.3% (7) lack of support for artistic excellence as issues.

Practitioners identified a general tendency to be risk averse at a similar level to local authorities 47.6% (10) and cited an equal fear of hostile reaction to new/challenging work 33.3% (7), but the most significant factor preventing excellence in arts provision was little interest in innovation 57.1% (12)

However, as Table 3 below illustrates, 70% (14) respondents felt that government directives aimed at encouraging excellence would have a positive impact on the arts, either strongly agreeing or agreeing that it may help to reinvest the arts with intrinsic value and enhance the reputation of their organisation.

9. In your opinion will government directives aimed at increasing participation and encouraging excellence have a positive impact on the profile of the arts? (tick all that apply)							
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	No Opinion	Rating Average	Response Count
Participation targets may boost awareness of the contribution the arts makes to the wider social agenda	15.0% (3)	35.0% (7)	25.0% (5)	0.0% (0)	25.0% (5)	2.85	20
Excellence may help to reinvest the arts with intrinsic value	30.0% (6)	40.0% (8)	20.0% (4)	0.0% (0)	10.0% (2)	2.20	20
Promoting artistic excellence may enhance the reputation of our organisation	30.0% (6)	40.0% (8)	10.0% (2)	5.0% (1)	15.0% (3)	2.35	20
None of the above	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	50.0% (1)	0.0% (0)	50.0% (1)	4.00	2

(Table 3) Practitioner’s perception of the impact of government directives relating to participation and excellence

6.4 Participation and the Inclusion Agenda

The creation of the welfare state dominated the political, economic and social landscape until the mid 1970’s, with a raft of nationalised industries and the creation of the NHS. This interventionist policy included subsidy and state involvement in the provision of arts, with post war settlements allowing local authorities increasing scope to become involved in the arts. However Gray (2000) notes that the arts remained an introspective policy arena, isolated from broader political issues,

“It was the relatively elitist notions of the arts for national prestige and for ‘civilising’ the masses” (pp47)

In 1945 during a BBC broadcast John Maynard Keynes, the influential British economist and prominent patron of the arts, set out the policy and aspirations of the newly established Arts Council with the pledge that ‘we desire to assure our people full access’.

However, over sixty years later the findings of the Taking Part survey suggest there is strong evidence that a class divide affects engagement. Bunting (2007) terms this a ‘participation divide’, which raises the question of whether there is a role for local authorities in countering apathy, and what ought the strategy to be for overcoming such passive resistance.

Certainly initiatives such as the ‘Find your Talent’¹⁷ scheme, which aims to put creativity at the heart of every child’s learning experience, can only help to encourage participation in the full cultural offer later in life. But this initiative is currently limited to ten pilot areas and therefore the majority of children are still subjected to an impoverished arts experience in the state education sector.

As already discussed ‘doing’ will be used to define participation in the forthcoming Participation Manifesto. This emphasis on actively taking part differs from the NI11 definition and excludes being in the audience, viewing or other related passive experiences of art forms. In a survey of NCA members only 8 out of 21 respondents concurred with this definition of participation, using their own terminology to describe exactly what constituted participation for them or their organisation as the examples below demonstrate;

“.....members of the public doing rather than watching”

“participation is involvement, interaction of the audience in some way (not passive viewing or listening)”

“Playing an instrument, singing or composing”

¹⁷ Find your Talent aims to ensure that all children and young people participate in at least five hours of high quality culture a week in and out of school - www.findyourtalent.org

“People actually making art”

“Participation is when people actively participate e.g. take part in performances, workshops, activities.”

“Active involvement (rather than passive, i.e. sitting in an audience)

However, for 11 respondents participation did have a broader meaning, which included attendance as an audience member, passive viewing of artwork, engagement in post show discussions and affording users the opportunity to feedback on the arts experience in order to shape the programme. This divided opinion highlights a need for a greater synergy in the terminology used by DCMS, ACE, local government, NCA and the arts sector.

The majority of respondents were seeking to evidence participation in some way, with the preferred method (65%) being to collect data either through the box office, admissions system or via attendance surveys. And as Table 3 illustrates there was a relatively high recognition amongst respondents as to the benefits of participation targets for boosting awareness of the contribution the arts makes to the wider social agenda.

Despite this keen commitment to participation and indication that mechanisms are in place to provide useful statistics, only 10% (2) respondents are contributing data towards their Local Area Agreement in demonstration of NI11 Engagement in the Arts. This seems to suggest a low awareness of local authority targets and a need for greater understanding across the whole arts sector, amateur, subsidised, commercial, voluntary and community of the importance of working together towards common goals.

6.5 Balancing Excellence & Participation

It is widely agreed that culture is an integral part of life and therefore it follows that the arts must be embedded in all LAA's regardless of whether NI11 has been selected. A document that outlines how the arts can deliver on cross-cutting local area agreement themes and offers useful case studies has been developed by the London office of ACE working with MLA London (2008). The ACE Northwest office have also been proactive in producing a series of case studies with simple yet inspiring suggestions for 'mainstreaming' the arts by ensuring they are 'fully integrated across the sustainable communities agenda'.

It is evident that the arts are strengthened when embedded across priority areas; but does such instrumental achievement constitute a dilution of intrinsic value or is this best practice in terms of balancing conflicting agendas?

The Audit Commission (1991) cites the main justification for local authorities to support arts provision in their areas is both excellence and access. Yet in Gray's opinion more than a decade of seeking to demonstrate the instrumental value of art has resulted in a situation whereby

"the arts carry little political or policy significance by themselves at local level, and only acquire these by their association with other issues"

(Gray 2000 p177)

Despite Elliot's insistence that excellence and participation are inextricably linked, the prognosis at local level differs and two thirds of arts officers surveyed indicated that they were either already encountering tensions between striving to increase participation and demonstrating excellence or could foresee the possibility in future.

In order to shift the debate to a solution based approach the focus group were asked to consider how these tensions could be reconciled to better demonstrate the value of the arts.

One perception that the group felt it would be useful to challenge was that excellence was expensive. Arts interventions offer relatively good value for money in comparison with other methods employed by Children's Services and Youth Offending teams for engaging with target groups.

A need to alert senior officers within local authorities to the challenges faced was also considered to be fundamental in working towards a resolution; particularly as they frequently come from a Leisure background and have a tendency to overlook the arts. This need to infiltrate the higher echelons of local authority hierarchy extended to elected Councillors.

In considering whether an absolute schism exists between DCMS/Arts Council expectations that Regularly Funded Organisations deliver excellence and Local Authority requirements that they demonstrate tangible outcomes measuring participation, it certainly seems as though there is some grounds to suspect that these imperatives are indeed moving in quite divergent directions.

However, a much lower percentage of practitioners responding to the NCA members survey could foresee tensions arising (28.6%) between the directives, although all those that had misgivings substantiated their concerns with specific examples;

“What is excellence? if a critical standard for the product of the participation this may not be appropriate”

“We could increase numbers of participants by offering more one-day 'taster' workshops. However these do not provide as satisfactory an artistic experience”

“Participation is about including those who want to improve their art. Excellence is about excluding those who show room for improvement.”

“The two directions are contradictory - one focussing on the work, the other on selling the work to others”

“The broader an experience, the narrower. It's semantics to pretend otherwise”

In their original response to McMaster's review NCA called for public sector support that 'seeks to make excellent art as widely and as broadly accessible as possible, so that its benefits are experienced by the many, not the few'.

This is a wholly commendable approach to balancing excellence and participation and the survey of NCA members prompted a few similar comments in responses to the question of how they were planning on responding to this particular challenge.

“Excellence has always been important to us because we believe in high quality of participation. Poor quality activities can damage the reputation of an art form and demoralise participants.”

However, echoing concerns voiced by respondents to the local authority officers survey on funding the following issue was flagged up;

“.....the extra expense in running participative activities of a high quality means compromising participant numbers, which in turn makes funding more difficult to obtain.....”

Whilst some respondents exhibited either reticence or complacency with regards to responding to the challenges, a variety of solutions were proffered ranging from total rebuttal of both directives through to considered organisational change and identification of new opportunities;

“In order to increase participant numbers while retaining the quality of our activity, we work in partnership with other organisations to lessen the administrative costs and give added value to both parties. We are also careful to establish activities which are self-financing”

“Endeavouring to be more commercial in our approach to the running of our company”

“...we are focussing on getting all our staff involved with participation a certain level of training, and we are looking into ways of getting nation wide training programmes accredited.”

A vibrant arts culture seems dependent on the existence of an informed and enthusiastic public aligning with arts providers who are responsive to their preferences. This relationship needs to be built on a respect for professional expertise and also an appreciation of the benefits of active public engagement.

7 SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

McMaster does not make it clear how the excellence agenda will dovetail with the participation agenda. If access and excellence are truly to become complimentary objectives cultural leaders will need to work closely with local authority officers to identify the common ground.

In Elliot's opinion it's not an either/or situation; rather a case of striving for excellence at the same time as attending to the maximum benefits in terms of numbers of people experiencing that excellence. But this over simplification of the issue suggests a widening disconnect between DCMS policy making and local authority arts provision, hampered by the fact that whilst arts provision remains a discretionary service central policy making exerts a degree of strategic influence but no control at local level; therefore tensions are inherent and symptomatic of a wider problem.

With another Comprehensive Spending Review on the not too distant horizon and indications of the need for radical policy making in tough times, this may result in the implementation of an invidious 'scale of importance' in the post-McMaster cultural apocalypse. Those art forms susceptible to attrition and without institutional bases may be subject to further unpalatable disinvestments as the government struggles to shore up the expensive London-centric bastions of excellence.

The official NCA response to McMaster claims there is a 'false dichotomy between access and excellence'. Whilst this has been much debated, the argument cannot be merely laid to rest until the tensions arising from an implementation perspective are resolved. For many local authority officers this binary improvement agenda features opposing constructions. And the tenet that people are instinctively drawn towards and enthused by the superlative, whereas mediocrity breeds apathy and indifference, does not equate to excellence and access being mutually dependent goals.

Local Authority Officers are a conduit for interpreting information and channelling improvement and therefore have a pivotal role to play in terms of bridging the gulf. Until they are better equipped with an understanding of how to achieve a unification of excellence and participation, cultural policies will remain oppositional and their expert role jeopardised.

Although frustration voiced at divergent targets ought not to erase the positive impact a focus on participation has had on the profile of the arts, as for many local authority officers this has helped increase awareness of the contribution their work makes to the wider council agenda.

The fact remains that whilst cultural organisations find it relatively simple to quantify the level of public engagement, it seems they have not been alerted to the value of participation from a local authority perspective. Furthermore, regardless of the detailed audience data available, few organisations will have robust evidence on the value of their cultural offer as a quality experience.

Importantly, this research found little evidence of progress to develop a tool that could measure quality of experience and the real challenge now for researchers is to establish what constitutes a generic 'transformative' experience from a range of variable conditions and circumstances in order to capture the essential quality.

8 RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 National Level

Writing at a time of ongoing recession, when earned income and sponsorship are threatened, it should be a Government priority to safeguard those activities that provide enjoyment, inspiration and hope. During an Open Dialogues session Elliot spoke of the ‘great influence the Department can wield for the sector’ and this research underlines a need for DCMS to clear a path through the conflicting directives that threaten to suffocate local authority arts provision.

In McMaster’s own conclusions to his review he notes that ‘There needs to be a more confident articulation of the concept of excellence’, whilst he insists this must be led by practitioners, there is a real imperative for government to clarify how excellence will help galvanise public engagement with the arts.

For a genuine culture of participation to flourish and the aspirations of Article 27 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights to be realised, local authority arts provision needs to become a statutory obligation, thus guaranteeing access to and support for the arts in the widest geographic sense. To ensure demographic equity and address concerns that this will lead to a retraction to the baseline minimum of standards, the arts also need to maintain relevance by responding to the plethora of audience research available gleaned through consultation, debate and public engagement.

There is evident merit in reframing the debate and by focusing on the quality of the process of public engagement some of the identified tensions can be alleviated. The Arts Council have launched a long-term research project

'Enriching Lives'¹⁸ and are co-funding workshops that will bring together practitioners and academics from across the country to share existing research, develop and trial methods for evaluating the artistic experience.

However caution ought to be exercised by those tasked with the development of a tool to measure the quality of experience, for whilst a satisfaction indicator linked to NI11 would better determine the quality of engagement, it is imperative to guard against the tendency to over bureaucratise the framework within which the arts are evaluated.

Although a joint DCMS/DCSF¹⁹ press release on the five hour 'Find your Talent' scheme in May 08 is full of the rhetoric of transformation, the claim that 'Ministers will now also be working on proposals to galvanise the enthusiasm for the initiative from all over the country' masks the real issue precluding rollout of the scheme.

Considering a staggering 141 areas applied to participate, it is suggested that the only impediment is a commitment to additional funding for the initiative. And balancing the funding equation needs to be resolved by illustrating the cross-departmental gain rather than seeking to demonstrate how the arts can deliver on this important aspect of the education agenda.

61.1% of Local Authority Arts Officers responding to the research survey stated that they had not received any support in helping to increase the percentage of population who have participated or attended an arts event or activity. The Arts Council have a commitment to working with local government to increase engagement in the arts with a national programme of support that includes facilitating the NI11 Community of Practice, but only 3 (16.7%) of respondents had joined this networking and information sharing

¹⁸ 'Enriching lives' with the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) is a long-term research project set up explore and evidence how peoples' lives are enriched and transformed through their experience of the arts.

¹⁹ Department for Children, Schools and Families

forum and just 1 respondent had received advice on data collection systems or attended a training event. This suggests more work needs to be undertaken by the consultants responsible for promoting these initiatives to publicize the resources and encourage local authorities and their partners to share learning.

In addition to ensuring there is a shared understanding of the data generated by NI11, there is also an opportunity for ACE officers to facilitate connections between arts organisations and local authorities to develop a co-ordinated approach and greater collaboration. The Arts Engagement posts introduced by ACE, Northwest may contribute and need to be actively monitored in order that the outcomes of the pilot can be verified and a nationwide rollout implemented, should the scheme be effective.

8.2 Local Government

Although an arts experience is essentially an individual response it would be foolish to overlook 'the elephant in the room'; politics is about mass social outcomes and therefore to suggest that local government relinquish their current fondness for using arts as a tool to achieve other policy aims would be naïve in the extreme.

Therefore, to bolster the perceived strategic importance of the arts service within local authorities it is essential that Arts Development Officers familiarise themselves with the priorities for improvement within their Local Area Agreement. Regardless of whether NI11 has been agreed as an improvement target, the arts are already making a significant contribution to a cross-cutting agenda as evidenced by Nalgao (2008)

70% of arts services support children and young people

68% deliver community well-being, equality and address exclusion

Whilst local authorities can make immediate improvements to ensure everyone has an opportunity to enjoy the arts by focusing on the relevancy of arts offer, this must be addressed alongside measures to ensure people feel they have the capacity to participate and thereby take up the offer. This can best be supported through the education system with greater commitment to Arts in Education posts, an under funded and marginalised local authority specialism.

There is also a clear need to alert senior officers within local authorities to the challenges faced in balancing these agenda's. And an opportunity to build the aspirations of those politicians nominated as portfolio holder's in order to ensure that quality of experience is reintroduced as a key consideration in arts development planning and internal performance reporting.

In addition to ensuring greater transparency and accountability to local people, Local Area Agreement indicators were intended to 'reduce the burdens on local authorities' (Healey 2008). This research has not challenged the reality of that intention, however future research into the benefits of stretch targets for culture would be of use particularly as evidence to suggest they are beneficial in terms of achieving real engagement gain would function as strong advocacy for further adoption of NI11.

8.3 Arts Sector

The research found that, although McMaster's recommendations have resulted in significant changes to processes, programming and practice, arts organisations perceive recent directives present less of a dichotomy.

The survey of NCA members suggests that excellence of engagement is already a key priority and therefore arts organisations may more easily be able to focus their effort on achieving both aims.

However, there is a dire need for greater understanding across the whole arts sector, amateur, subsidised, commercial, voluntary and community of how their work contributes to Local Area Agreement targets and the importance of working together towards achieving these common goals.

This can best be achieved by NCA, as they are currently considering ways in which the arts sector can develop a better working relationship with local authorities and a natural synergy exists between the findings of this research and the objectives of their strategic peach placement.

Finally, there is a real requirement for shared terminology relating to both participation and excellence to be agreed and adopted by DCMS, ACE, local government, NCA and the arts sector.

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APPENDICES

1 Survey of Nalgao Members

2 Survey of NCA Members

3 Focus Group Prompts

4 Interview questions - Mick Elliot

5 Interview questions - David Brownlee

1. Default Section

* 1. Are you aware of the recommendations outlined in the report by Sir Brian McMaster 'Supporting Excellence in the Arts' DCMS January 08

- Yes
 Don't Know
 No

2. Has this directive and the ensuing debate resulted in a change in any of the following (please give details)

No

Your approach to artistic programming

Your internal processes

Your practice as a Local Authority Officer

3. In what ways are you currently evidencing excellence? (tick all that apply)

- Using the ACE Arts Performance Checklist
- Arts at the Strategic Centre (ACE self-assessment tool)
- Other Self-assessment
- Making assessment based on level of artistic risk-taking
- Making assessment based on level of artistic innovation
- Through peer review
- By involving artists in the process
- Other (please specify)

4. Does your local authority collect data to evidence NI11 'Participation in the Arts' either as part of the Local Area Agreement or as a local indicator?

- No
- Don't Know
- Yes - Through the 'Active People' survey
- Yes - By collating attendance data at events and activities
- Other (please specify)

5. Have you received any support in helping to increase % of population who have participated/attended an arts event/activity at least 3 times in the past 12 months? (tick all that apply)

- None
- Funding allocated by local authority
- Funding allocated by Arts Council England
- Funding allocated by other
- Advice on data collection systems
- Attended ACE national training event
- Joined NI11 Community of Practice facilitated by ACE
- Other (please specify)

*** 6. Are you encountering or do you foresee any tensions between striving to increase participation and demonstrating excellence?**

- No
- Maybe
- Yes (please elaborate)

*** 7. Do you believe that artistic excellence is the best way to encourage wider and more meaningful public engagement with the Arts?**

- Yes
- Maybe
- No (please elaborate)

8. What factors currently prevent the achievement of excellence in local authority arts provision?

(tick all that apply)

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Not relevant to local authority arts provision | <input type="checkbox"/> Limited access to touring opportunities due to location |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of funding | <input type="checkbox"/> Fear of hostile reaction to new/challenging work |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of political aspiration | <input type="checkbox"/> Insufficient artistic diversity |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Focus on community/voluntary arts | <input type="checkbox"/> Paucity of international offer |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Local authorities are risk adverse | <input type="checkbox"/> Minimal artistic involvement in decision-making |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Little interest in innovation | <input type="checkbox"/> Focus predominantly on tangible measures |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Limited officer knowledge | <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of relevance to local communities served |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify) | |

9. Overall to what extent have these directives impacted on the profile of the arts in your local authority?

(tick all that apply)

- Participation targets have helped to increase awareness of the contribution the arts makes to the councils wider agenda
- Notions of excellence have helped to reinvest the arts with intrinsic value
- Promoting artistic excellence has enhanced the reputation of the local authority
- None of the above

10. What rating did your authority achieve at its most recent Comprehensive Performance Assessment?

- Poor
- Fair
- Good
- Excellent

1. Default Section

*** 1. McMaster defines excellence in culture as 'when an experience affects and changes an individual' (Supporting Excellence in the Arts, DCMS Jan 08)**

Do you agree with this definition?

- Yes
- Don't Know
- No

Alternative definition

*** 2. Do you believe increased focus on artistic excellence is the best way to encourage wider and more meaningful public engagement with the Arts?**

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Other factors that would better encourage public engagement with the Arts

3. Has the 'excellence' debate resulted in a change in any of the following (please give details)

Your approach to artistic programming

Your practice as an artist/arts organisation

Your level of risk-taking

Your focus on innovation

Your process of evaluation

No

**4. In what ways are you currently demonstrating excellence?
(tick all that apply)**

- Making self-assessment based on level of artistic risk-taking
- Making self-assessment based on level of artistic innovation
- Through peer review - involving artists in the process
- Through peer review - involving other arts organisations in the process
- Audience feedback/comment forms
- Critics reviews
- Positive media coverage
- Not currently seeking to evidence excellence
- Other (please specify)

5. What defines participation for you/your organisation?

6. How do you currently evidence participation? (this includes either attendance at arts events or participation in arts activities)

- Box office data/attendance surveys/admissions
- Contributing data to Local Area Agreement NI11 'Engagement in the Arts'
- Not sure
- Not currently demonstrating participation
- Other (please specify)

*** 7. Do you foresee any tensions between striving to increase participation and demonstrating excellence?**

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Please state any tensions you foresee

8. In areas where excellence is not viewed as the priority in arts provision, what do you think are the contributory factors? (tick all that apply)

- Focus predominantly on tangible measures
 - Little interest in innovation
 - Risk averse
 - Focus on increasing attendance figures
 - Focus on community/voluntary arts
 - Fear of hostile reaction to new/challenging work
 - Other (please specify)
- Minimal artistic involvement in governance
 - Instrumental social agendas such as health taking precedence
 - Lack of relevance to communities served
 - Lack of support for artistic excellence
 - Lack of funding

9. In your opinion will government directives aimed at increasing participation and encouraging excellence have a positive impact on the profile of the arts? (tick all that apply)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	No Opinion
Participation targets may boost awareness of the contribution the arts makes to the wider social agenda	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Excellence may help to reinvest the arts with intrinsic value	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Promoting artistic excellence may enhance the reputation of our organisation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
None of the above	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

10. How are you as an artist/arts organisation planning to respond to these challenges?

Prompt Questions for Nalgao Focus Group

Open Space Forum, Nalgao Conference, Blackpool 8th October 2008

A handout detailing the McMaster definition of excellence and national indicator definition of participation will be circulated to prompt debate.

1. How would you define excellence?
2. How relevant is excellence from a local authority arts perspective?
3. Is artistic excellence the best way to encourage wider and more meaningful public engagement with the Arts?
4. What prevents the achievement of excellence?
5. Do tensions exist between striving to increase participation and demonstrating excellence?
6. How can these tensions be reconciled to better demonstrate the value of the Arts?

Prompt Questions for Telephone Interview with Mick Elliot

3rd November 2008

DCMS & Arts Policy

1. The DCMS website states 'We aim to improve the quality of life for all through cultural and sporting activities, to support the pursuit of excellence and to champion the tourism, creative and leisure industries'

How would you personally define excellence in the arts?

2. How influential is the pursuit of excellence in current DCMS policy-making and funding decisions?
3. In your opinion is artistic excellence the best way to encourage wider and more meaningful public engagement with the arts?

Arts Provision and Local Government

4. If the Arts were a statutory service would this in your opinion ameliorate some of the inconsistencies of local authority provision?
5. What do you think prevents Local Authorities from the achievement of excellence in arts provision?
6. The McMaster report has generated significant public sector debate; do you think local authority representatives ought to have been involved in the consultation process?

Balancing excellence and participation

7. How can public sector support for the arts better encourage excellence, risk-taking and innovation?

8. Do you foresee tensions between PSA3 target, which seeks to increase arts attendance/arts participation and the pursuit of excellence?

9. In your opinion how can Local Authority Arts Officers reconcile these tensions to better demonstrate the value of the arts?

Prompt Questions for Telephone Interview with David Brownlee

20th January 2009

Arts Council Policy

1. Tell me about your role and the Public Engagement Programme.
2. *Great art for everyone 2008-11* states a set of national objectives including: Excellence, Reach, Engagement, Diversity and Innovation. How would you personally define excellence in the arts?
3. How influential is the pursuit of excellence in current ACE policy-making and funding decisions?
4. In your opinion is artistic excellence the best way to encourage wider and more meaningful public engagement with the arts?
5. Can you tell me about the Arts Council's plans to develop a tool that measures the quality of experience?

Arts Provision and Local Government

6. Can you tell me more about the North West pilot post of 'Engagement Officer', and how this will assist Local Authorities in boosting participation?
7. What do you think prevents Local Authorities from the achievement of excellence in arts provision?

Balancing excellence and participation

8. 9.4 million people participate in voluntary and amateur arts groups (source DCMS Our Creative Talent) yet receive less than 2% of mainstream arts funding.

Do you foresee the pursuit of excellence impacting on Voluntary Arts provision?

9. How can public sector support for the arts better encourage excellence, risk-taking and innovation?

10. Do you foresee tensions between PSA3/NI11 target, which seeks to increase arts attendance/arts participation and the pursuit of excellence?

11. In your opinion how can Local Authority Arts Officers reconcile these tensions to better demonstrate the value of the arts?