



nalgao Conference Evaluation: Blackpool 2008

1. Introduction

As part of nalgao's strive for continuing improvement of our member services, an exit survey was conducted at the nalgao conference in Blackpool, with delegates being requested to complete a short questionnaire. The consensus from responses and from word-of-mouth comments and emails returned after the event suggests that the 2008 nalgao conference proved to be a really excellent event, with a good range of speakers, breakout sessions and study tours. The destination of Blackpool delighted delegates, particularly those who had never been there before.

The conference attracted a total of 219 delegates (including presenters), a big increase on last year's event in Cambridge, which drew 186 delegates and presenters, improving the average to match previous years' events (204 delegates in 2005 in Cardiff, 230 in 2004 in Brighton and 225 attending the Liverpool conference in 2003). Despite the fact that several local authorities have declared moratoriums on staff attending conferences and we note that the 'credit crunch' bites, it seems that the nalgao conference is still viewed as a very important event on the local authority arts calendar. The very positive feedback from the Blackpool delegates is likely to ensure that it stays that way.

We would like to thank ACE for supporting our GfA Conference Development programme, which is now in its final year of development, with nalgao being the recipient of a major grant of £77,669. The grant has allowed us to develop more interactive and participative conference programme in 2008 and has enabled us to build a strong platform for future events.

To date, we received questionnaire responses from 60 people who attended, representing 27% of delegates. We have also received a considerable number of emails and phone calls commenting on the success of the event. Overall delegates have been extremely positive in their feedback with words such as inspiring, informative and energising coming up regularly in their comments. The balance of social and formal events was applauded and people particularly enjoyed the Civic Reception, which was viewed as a 'hard act to follow'. Any criticisms were put forward constructively and the conference seems in a position to take these on board and build on what has been achieved this year.

1.1 Structure and duration

The structure and duration worked very well this year with the main suggestion for change being the timing of the Open Space Forum. It was inevitable that some sessions overran and it has been suggested that the breakout sessions be more carefully monitored with a little more time given to debate and interaction. The feedback pointed towards a need for more active participation rather than just being 'show & tell'.

On the whole the feedback was positive with almost 80% showing good / excellent response to the breakout sessions and a whopping 95% good / excellent response to the study tours.

As with 2007, the nalgao AGM was combined with conference event on the first day, which worked favourably.

The duration of the event was appropriate, split over 2 half days and one full day, and the balance of having just one keynote presenter each day worked very well. Repeating breakouts was also supported by delegates and enabled greater choice. Study tours and breakout sessions were very well supported, with a plea for some to increase the duration of breakouts to enable more discussion. Some also suggested repeating study tours, but this may not be possible due to costs and timing.

Recommendations:

- That the facilitation of the breakout sessions should be improved to deliver more opportunity for interactive debate.
- The Open Space Forum needs to be reviewed with regard to timing and structure.



1.2 Location of the Conference for 2010

We already have a firm offer from Swindon BC to host the conference at the Wyvern Theatre for 2009. We asked delegates to suggest possible locations for the conference in 2010. The following geographical areas were suggested:

LOCATION	NUMBERS RESPONDING	% RESPONSE
SE/Brighton/Canterbury/Kent	10	18%
NE/Gateshead/Newcastle	9	16%
Scotland/Glasgow/Edinburgh	6	11%
WM/Birmingham	5	9%
N Yorks/York	5	9%
SW/Cornwall/Exeter/Bath/Bristol/Swindon	4	7%
EM/Nottingham/Leicester/Lincoln	3	5%
Manchester	3	5%
E Yorkshire/Leeds/Bridlington	2	4%
NW/Liverpool/Blackpool/Preston/Cumbria	2	4%
Eastern Region/Norwich/Colchester	2	4%
Wales	2	4%
N. Ireland/Belfast	1	2%
London	1	2%

Recommendations:

- We have had an interest in hosting from the Surrey.
- The most popular future locations are Newcastle and Kent.
- There is still considerable interest in moving the conference outside of our present main catchment area, mainly to Scotland (Glasgow or Edinburgh).
- Several delegates asked for the venue to be centrally located with easy access by road and rail.

2. 2008 Conference Delegate Assessment

A detailed assessment of delegate views is reported below:

2.1 The Winter Gardens as a venue

Overall, delegates were delighted not only with the Winter Gardens venue but also with Blackpool itself, which many people had never visited.

	Delegate response	% Response	% Cambridge response 2007
Excellent	26	44%	42%
Good	29	49%	44%
Satisfactory	4	7%	13%
Poor	0	0	0%

2.2 Range and Quality of speakers

Delegates were generally pleased with keynote presenters, being particularly impressed by Wayne Hemmingway MBE, although in contrast several noted disappointment in the presentation by Alan Davey, Chief Executive of Arts Council England. Again, delegate scores are compared with Cambridge last year:

Wednesday

	Delegate response	% Response	% Cambridge response 2007
Excellent	19	32%	15%
Good	23	39%	65%
Satisfactory	3	5%	17%
Poor	0	0%	0%
No Opinion	14	24%	4%



Thursday

	Delegate response	% Response	% Cambridge response 2007
Excellent	14	24%	37%
Good	25	42%	55%
Satisfactory	11	19%	6%
Poor	3	5%	2%
No Opinion	6	10%	

Friday

	Delegate response	% Response	% Cambridge response 2007
Excellent	10	17%	23%
Good	24	41%	52%
Satisfactory	13	22%	26%
Poor	5	8%	2%
No Opinion	7	12%	

2.3 Breakout Sessions

Breakout sessions were again well received and delegates favourably supported the range and quality of speakers with a generally high level of satisfaction. Some delegates asked for the opportunity for more interactive and lively debate. Scoring was recorded as follows:

Thursday

	Delegate response	% Response	% Cambridge response 2007
Excellent	16	27%	30%
Good	30	51%	46%
Satisfactory	6	10%	16%
Poor	1	2%	9%
No Opinion	6	10%	

Friday

	Delegate response	% Response	% Cambridge response 2007
Excellent	22	37%	46%
Good	23	39%	40%
Satisfactory	7	12%	13%
Poor	1	2%	0%
No Opinion	6	10%	

There was good level of satisfaction with both the suitability, calibre and duration of the sessions, with the only adverse comments coming from sessions that overran, showing that timekeeping could be improved.

Recommendations:

- That the breakout leaders be given a guidance note on the development of presentations to avoid wordy PowerPoint presentations.
- That breakouts be monitored and extended for an additional 15 minutes to allow for more facilitated discussion.
- That there is a good balance of breakout sessions to provide for those people who wish to be talked at and those who wish to engage in lively debate.

2.4 Study Tours

Study tours in Blackpool were a very successful part of this year's conference programme, a few people asking whether there could be two opportunities to sample the local arts projects. It also gave additional opportunity for networking and for delegates to mix and meet informally. Study tours (again compared to Cambridge) rated:



	Delegate response	% Response	% Cambridge response 2007
Excellent	39	66%	36%
Good	17	29%	34%
Satisfactory	1	2%	11%
Poor	0	0%	19%
No Opinion	2	3%	

Tours were very well received, particularly the Blackpool Walking and Panopticons experiences.

Recommendations:

- This year's Study Tours obviously hit the right note with people so any lessons learned will be very important when planning what will inevitably be 'a hard act to follow'.

2.5 General Organisation

Delegates were very satisfied with the chairing responsibilities, administrative and organisational support given to them over the Conference period. nalgao was supported by 2 local arts administrators to assist at the reception point, and thanks also goes to the Front of House and cloakroom staff at The Winter Gardens for their support throughout the three days. The only concern was the long queuing for catering on the Thursday lunch (due to a hot buffet and the need for service).

General Organisation rated:

	Delegate response	% Response	% Cambridge response 2007
Excellent	37	63%	46%
Good	19	32%	43%
Satisfactory	2	3%	8%
Poor	0	0%	4%
No Opinion	1	2%	

2.6 Catering

Catering services scored very well this year. On the whole, delegates were delighted with the standard of food, particularly at the Civic Reception. A few commented on the lack of salad, fruit and some problems for people with allergies.

Delegates rated catering:

	Delegate response	% Response	% Cambridge response 2007
Excellent	24	41%	55%
Good	19	32%	25%
Satisfactory	13	22%	17%
Poor	1	2%	4%
No Opinion	2	3%	

2.7 Open Space Forum

Whilst feedback shows that this is viewed as an important part of the conference and an opportunity to network, the timing and structure is not achieving the desired outcomes.

Scoring was recorded as follows:

	Delegate response	% Response	% Cambridge response 2007
Excellent	4	7%	16%
Good	17	29%	35%
Satisfactory	9	15%	31%
Poor	3	5%	6%



No Opinion	26	44%	12%
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Recommendations:

- To look at the timing of the session, putting it at a time when people have more energy for networking and active discussion
- To have more controversial debate
- To consider something completely different

2.8 Value for Money

As with last year, the vast majority of delegates thought that the conference represented good value for money. It should be noted that delegate fees had been frozen for the last 2 years and remained at 2006 levels for 2008. As with last year, delegate's fees had been reduced for Wednesday and Friday in response to comments I 2006. It should be noted that only 4 delegates took advantage of this reduction, coming for either Wednesday or Friday only, compared to 11 who booked for either Wednesday or Friday only in London. nalgao also introduced a new combined delegate fee for officers who wished to bring elected members with them, and 2 sets of delegates used this to bring their elected members to conference. The scoring was:

	Delegate response	% Response	% Cambridge response 2007
Good Value for money	49	83%	88%
Poor value for money	0	0%	6%
Don't Know	10	17%	10%

Scoring is comparable with last year and it is gratifying that so many delegates have the opinion that the conference represents value for money.

Recommendations:

- That the very positive experience of Blackpool delegates be used to 'advertise' the value of coming to the conference.

3. Training Potential of the Conference

Delegates were asked their opinion of the conference as a training and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) tool. Delegates responded:

Do you think that the conference supports:	Yes	% Response	No	% Response
Some of your training needs:	48	81%	7	12%
Some of your CPD needs:	52	88%	1	2%

This compares to last year, where 84% of delegates thought that the conference supports some of their training needs, and 96% thought that the conference supports some of their CPD needs.

4. Themes and ideas for sessions for 2009

Most thought that a central theme was not important. Rather, the range and quality of speakers and presenters was paramount. Ideas for presentations for Conference 2008 included:

- Survival
- Fundraising and funding (run up to Olympics & post "credit crunch")
- Fundraising
- Mixing different artforms with technology to reduce the carbon footprint
- Cultural Olympiad: continued discussion on 2012. Working between ACE / LA / Voluntary Sector.
- Cultural Entitlement and the relationship between state funding and the market.
- Showcasing Excellence



- o Engaging hard to reach communities in the arts - what does public engagement in the arts actually mean?
- o Supporting Creative Industries
- o Living Places, Agenda, following on from Wayne Hemmingway's public art house development speech.
- o Festivals
- o Artistic Quality v Process in community arts projects in the context of McMaster Review
- o Young People 2009
- o Common standards for LAs in providing gateways and pathways for participation in the arts (with NCA)
- o Arts with non-arts money
- o Creativity and Arts Officers - have we gotten lost in the paperwork?
- o How we focus on our priorities - when we work to so many agendas how do we decide which are core?
- o Sustainability

Action: Some of the above suggestions could be incorporated into breakout sessions, study tours at next year's conference or into the nalgao National Seminar programme considering key issues.

5. Conference Improvements

Delegates were requested to suggest possible improvements for the future. Ideas and suggestions included:

Overall Structure:

- o Different start times confusing, and there is a need to start later on Thursday and Friday. If there is an event on the Thursday night, please start Friday later than 9am.
- o Encourage more artists / companies to exhibit & attend. Artists & officers need to talk more so know how they can help each other.
- o Running buddies, yoga, more practical sessions
- o Opportunity for debate, more creativity in the structure & design of sessions / speakers. More 'fun' / playful methods of presentation / learning.
- o More participatory sessions – we spend too much time in office & not being practically creative.
- o Have an informal networking event with drinks at the end of the first day - people usually quite spent by 4pm & are not at their best in terms of participating in a structured "open space" session.
- o Too much paperwork! People should just pick up what they want - it's a huge waste giving so many leaflets to each delegate (Editor note: we make £50 on each leaflet circulated, which helps keep delegate costs down)
- o It would be good to have a running order for the day, and a map, up in the registration area.
- o It was a shame that the screen was hardly visible, so presentations were lacking of visual support.
- o More space & time to swap ideas & projects with other ADO's.

Keynote Presentations

- o Have a debate on arts spending. Get people who don't necessarily think the arts are a great thing
- o Some of the keynote speeches were quite dry & often a stark contrast to the engaging breakout sessions.
- o Better keynote speakers - we can't just rely on the post/position of the speaker - they should be able to speak as well!

For Breakout Sessions:

- o More discussion time needed & to be led by a facilitator with a few critical questions
- o Don't try to pack too much in to some of the sessions, enable a bit more depth for discussion
- o It would be good to see some guidance notes (short). Focus the presentations in the breakouts so that more time is left for discussion.
- o Interesting presentations in breakouts but many were too long - not enough time for discussion / questions.
- o Had a very interesting session with Paul Birch. Would like something similar again.
- o Some breakout sessions rushed - 3 presenters too much
- o More practical sessions where we can really have a go!



- Problem solving sessions - the arts partnership session was good with an issue that had to be raised in small groups & then others provided solutions. It was a great way to exchange good practice and for more experienced officers to provide support to less experienced officers.
- Breakout sessions should be given more guidance and be checked out. Quality is varied.
- I would like the breakout sessions to go beyond 'show & tell'.
- Need a greater balance of creative / active sessions on speakers as a lot of the breakout sessions were quite formal. It is also a shame when people use the Q&A sessions as an opportunity to voice personal grievances, as this can put a negative spin on a positive (or what should be) presentation.

Study Tours:

- 2 study tour options rather than one (although this may not be possible due to cost)

Open Space Forum:

- Open space needs to be revitalised and improved
- Open space has become tired. Whilst it is good in principle - we need better motivation, more controversy.
- End of open space forum - perhaps people just feedback 3 key points.
- Not a fan of Open Space. Study Tours fantastic.

6. Other comments

Responses this year were in the main extremely positive, once again singing the praises of Blackpool as a destination and venue. Delegates offered the following comments:

- Just to say that this conference was truly inspiring, I just wished I could have done 2 of the study tours, but the break out sessions, key note speakers and evening entertainment provided a great balance this year.
- Thank you for a fantastic event and thank you Blackpool for possibly being the most insane & la la! place.
- Left us recharged. A really good couple of days. Thank you!
- Work pressures meant I was unable to attend the whole conference but I really enjoyed my attendance on the Thursday and got a lot from it.
- A brilliant conference and great venues. Maybe more practical/interactive sessions on first day to encourage networking/help make new friends.
- This has been the best conference I have ever been to. Blackpool Council has been brilliant & organised wonderful breakout sessions and evening entertainment, which made me network in a way I enjoyed - I usually avoid networking. I have never been bored (except during Alan Davey's speech which caused me to lose concentration. Swindon has a hard act to follow.
- The civic reception was a brilliant insight into Blackpool's charm and charisma - it was a great addition to the conference
- Fantastic conference, very affirming! Learnt loads, really stimulates thought & change.
- Keep up the high quality of keynote speakers & breakout sessions. Also the artists in residence were very impressive this year. Also keep a good balance between listening, doing, networking and finding out about the local area.
- Excellent conference, and was a fantastic place to have it. Felt really welcome everywhere I went. Loads of interesting breakout, shame about the Chief Exec of ACE having no presentation skills, but he was the only low point!
- Alan Davey was awful
- Blackpool good venue - fun. Enjoyed Civic Reception. Too much emphasis on agendas dictated by government & ACE etc., would prefer more emphasis on issues affecting delivery. Panopticons study tour was good. Breakout sessions were more like case studies. Speakers (except Wayne Hemmingway) were poor - no passion.
- Pete is a star!! Blackpool has stunned me: what an amazing place, and fantastic civic reception - thank you.
- Excellent venue & organisation
- This was my first nalgao conference and it was brilliant. Especially liked the study tour (walking tour of Blackpool) and the civic reception - real flavour of Blackpool and what it's achieving.
- Blackpool were great hosts. The social aspects were fantastic! Really enjoyed it.



- o Only attended Wed & Fri but found the event fully informative and a greatly beneficial and invigorating event
- o It was a very informative & interesting conference and I thoroughly enjoyed it. Blackpool was great and the event at the Tower Ballroom was fabulous!
- o I learned a lot, among very nice people, both participants and organisers and the local community.
- o Extremely enjoyable & informative event. The events programme and study tours particularly worthy of mention. Has made me want to come back to Blackpool.
- o Enjoyed better than last year. Better range of discussion topics. Wayne Hemmingway was fabulous. Study tour fantastic & Blackpool - just brilliant. Very surreal & a little mad.
- o Study tours were excellent - would be good to perhaps go on 2 throughout conference or maybe a whole day.
- o ACE keynote speaker very disappointing (not your fault!)
- o We are here to deliver art; the breakouts where we sit and listen to people reading from Powerpoint presentations mean little. I can look that up. Access through other routes. Being creatively inspired is imperative.
- o Well done on the creative programme including Sound wave and the Panopticons study tour as these were both very inspiring. The creative programme at the Civic Reception was also great!
- o I thought the Civic Reception was fantastic - really good fun.
- o Stimulating, supportive & inspiring as ever! Thursday evening in the Tower Ballroom was fantastic - will be hard to top. Entertainment on both evenings is a fairly new addition & I wonder whether it will be possible to continue to offer this within a reasonable budget.
- o Quality of speakers was varied - especially enjoyed Hemmingway talk & breakout & the visits to Panopticons. Well chaired.
- o The cabaret evening was brilliant - came away from the conference feeling inspired and energised.
- o Impressive range of spaces. Winter Gardens Staff seemed poorly briefed - some were very polite & friendly, some just rude. Customer care needs improving.
- o The event at the Tower Ballroom was fabulous! Well done to the staff from Blackpool who were behind the planning of this event.
- o The Civic Reception was fantastic; the entertainment was superb - well done Blackpool. A hard act to follow.
- o We need speakers with a passion & conviction, rather than the droning platitudes often delivered. However, Civic Reception best ever as art at the heart and as ever Pete an absolute star. Thank you!!
- o The sound wave event at the end of the conference was great!
- o So much to see, so little time.....
- o Can we have Mr Bear every year.

7. Delegate Attendance patterns

It may be interesting to note that the conference attracted more delegates who booked for all three days than those attending in London and Cambridge. This may be the result of a pricing review, pegging delegate fees to those levied in 2006/7, and actually reducing some areas such as those on Wednesday and Friday. nalgao also introduced a combined delegate and elected member rate to increase elected member attendance.

Bookings included:

Rate	Blackpool 2008	Cambridge 2007	London 2006
Members (3 day pass@ £295)	75	67	49
Conference special rate (1 officer + 1 member @£350)	0	2	-
Members: Wednesday or Friday only (@ £125)	1	3	7
Conference special rate (1 officer + 1 member)	0	0	-
Members: Thursday only (@ £185)	7	7	18
Conference special rate (1 officer + 1 member)	0	0	-
Members Wednesday & Thursday only (@ £265)	35	17	21
Conference special rate (1 officer + 1 member)	1	0	-
Executives & Records Working (@ £200)	9	8	8



Non-members (3 day pass @ £495)	0	0	0
Non-members (Wednesday or Friday only @ £200)	0	0	0
Non-members (Thursday only @ £260)	1	2	0
Non-member 2 day concession (@ £400)	2	1	3
Special Eastern area Rate (@ £295)	0	2	0
Commercial stands (@ £500)	0	0	1
Charity, arts & local arts organisation stands (@ £300)	3	3	6
Additional person on display area (@ £150)	1	0	3
Leaflet circulation in delegate packs (@ £50)	12	7	15

8. Delegate attendance by Region

The following table of delegates attending is based on the regional divisions of Arts Council England and Wales, comparing Cambridge (2007), London (2006) and 2005 (Cardiff):

ACE Region	2008	%	2007	%	2006	%	2005	%	Av. attendance	%
Eastern	8	4%	51	27%	14	8%	10	5%	21	11%
EM	13	6%	16	9%	11	6%	20	10%	15	8%
London	23	10%	31	17%	78	44%	27	13%	40	22%
NE	4	2%	4	2%	2	1%	7	3%	4	2%
NW	97	45%	17	9%	19	11%	27	13%	40	22%
SE/Southern	31	14%	23	12%	20	11%	24	12%	24	13%
SW	13	6%	13	7%	14	8%	12	6%	13	7%
WM	11	5%	9	5%	6	3%	15	7%	10	5%
Yorkshire	8	4%	11	6%	5	3%	9	4%	8	4%
Wales	5	2%	6	3%	7	4%	52	25%	17	9%
IOM	1	1%	1	0.5%	0	0%	0	0%	1	1%
Channel Isles	2	1%	3	2%	0	0%	1	0.5%	1	1%
N. Ireland	2	1%	0	0%	3	2%	0	0%	1	1%

It is worth noting that the average attendance over the last 4 years is 185 delegates, and that the Blackpool conference was 16% up on average attendance. As in other years, clearly location is a major issue, with less people travelling from extreme positions of the country. It may seem obvious to say that the majority of delegates come from the immediate area, but this is illustrated perfectly in 2008, with over 45% of all delegates attending coming from the NW region. Overall, London and the NW show the highest average attendance per region.

9. Thanks

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who participated this year, and particularly Blackpool Council for hosting the conference this year. Carolyn, Lynne and their combined arts teams did a wonderful job in developing the local infrastructure to the conference, in putting together a representative selection of study tours, and organising the social evening on Thursday. They also financially contributed to the conference with considerable help in kind. We would also like to thank other NW regional members for contributions to the planning process and also for arranging study tours and breakout sessions.

nalgao would like to thank EUCLID and Arts Professional for sponsoring the conference this year. nalgao would also like to thank ACE, as without their financial support through a 3-year GfA Conference Development Programme this year and over the last 2 years, we would not have been able to make so many of the new initiatives that we are developing. Finally, thanks are also due to NW regional members for supporting the conference this year, and contributing so much to the development programme and the Conference working party, very ably Chaired by Andrea Bushell (Oldham MBC) that has developed the conference in 2008.