Public value and the arts in England: Discussion and conclusions of the arts debate

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Arts Council England works to get more art to more people in more places. We develop and promote the arts across England, acting as an independent body at arm's length from government.

Between 2006 and 2008, we will invest £1.1 billion of public money from government and the National Lottery in supporting the arts. This is the bedrock of support for the arts in England.

We believe that the arts have the power to change lives and communities, and to create opportunities for people throughout the country.

1 Introduction

In 2006 the Arts Council launched the arts debate, our first-ever public value inquiry. A large-scale programme of research and consultation, its purpose was to engage a wide range of people in a debate about the value of the arts and the role of public funding. In particular, the arts debate sought to explore how public value is currently created by the arts today and what it would mean for the Arts Council and the individuals and organisations we fund to create greater public value. It also sought to understand how the Arts Council can best balance public aspirations with the needs and priorities of our partners in the arts community and other stakeholders[1].

The arts debate involved a number of distinct strands of research and consultation. It began in October 2006 with three workshops with Arts Council staff. The second stage was a large programme of qualitative research with members of the public, comprising 20 discussion groups across the country. This allowed us to identify a number of key questions about the arts and their funding, which we put out to open consultation between February and May 2007. At the same time we commissioned around 80 in-depth interviews and discussion groups with members of the arts community and our wider stakeholder base. The last stage of the research was a programme of deliberation, where members of the public and arts professionals came together to debate the key issues and to develop shared priorities and principles for public funding of the arts. A final consultation event in September asked members of the arts community to debate the future of the Arts Council using an 'open space'[2] meeting style.

A wide range of people took part in the arts debate. It involved nearly 50 members of Arts Council staff, over 200 members of the public from diverse socio-demographic backgrounds, over 80 artists and arts managers representing a variety of genres and around 30 stakeholder organisations such as local

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[1] For more information on public value and the background to the arts debate see *Public value and the arts: Literature review* and *Public engagement with the arts: Arts Council England's strategic challenges*, both available at www.artscouncil.org.uk/artsdebate/about.php. In preparing this report we have drawn on further research and policy material, and relevant publications are referenced as appropriate.

[2] For more information on open space methods see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_Space_Technology

authorities, charities and health and education institutions. There were over 1,200 contributions to the open consultation in the form of written submissions or posts on the arts debate website and around 150 representatives of the arts community at the final open space event.

The detailed findings of each stage of research and consultation are available on the Arts Council website[3]. The purpose of this report is to bring together the findings from the different stages of the inquiry to provide an overall account of how people think and feel about the arts in England today, and their aspirations for public funding. Section 2 summarises the nature and terms of the debate – the perceptions and attitudes that people brought to the discussion and the ways in which opinions developed and shifted during the course of the inquiry. In section 3 we describe the types of individuals and organisations that took part in the debate and explore their roles, motivations and expectations as they relate to the arts. Section 4 identifies some of the shared views and values that emerged during the inquiry – the issues on which there appears to be broad consensus across public and professional communities. In contrast, section 5 highlights the main points of tension – the areas that caused the most disagreement and where the debate was most fiercely fought. In section 6 we describe the ways in which participants attempted to resolve some of the difficulties and consider the extent to which different tensions can and should be reconciled. The report concludes with remarks on the outcomes of the debate and next steps for the Arts Council.

This report does not consider the implications of the arts debate findings for future arts policy. Rather it is intended as a contribution to the ongoing debate about the nature and value of the arts and the purpose and role of public funding. The Arts Council is considering the findings in detail and through ongoing dialogue with all our publics they will inform our future strategy for the arts in England. A more detailed analysis of implications for our long-term priorities and proposed actions will follow in the first half of 2008 and will be published on the Arts Council website.

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[3] See www.artscouncil.org.uk/artsdebate/research.php

2 The terms and nature of the debate

In order to interpret the findings presented in this report it is helpful to understand how we reached them. In this section we explain who was involved in the inquiry and how they approached the process of debate and deliberation. We also examine the extent to which attitudes and opinions shifted as a result of taking part in the debate.

2.1 Recruitment and self-selection

Participants were recruited in one of two ways. Participants in the formal research stages were invited to take part by independent research agencies and compensated for their time. Samples were carefully constructed to be representative of the population, including those with little or no involvement or interest in the arts. By contrast, the consultation stage was open to anyone who wished to express their opinions on the arts and their funding. Respondents to the consultation were therefore self-selected and so their views are not necessarily representative of the population at large. Where relevant we make the distinction between views gathered through formal research and those gathered through open consultation.

2.2 Approaches to the debate

The arts debate explored some complex questions, and participants approached the challenge with different perspectives and expectations. Many people were simply curious about what their workshop or interview would entail, and the topics that might be discussed. Some doubted whether the conversation would be relevant to them or whether they would have much to contribute. Others welcomed the opportunity to contribute to a debate they considered important and to have their views heard. A small number saw the arts debate as a chance to voice specific grievances or to lobby for their particular agenda or organisation. What the majority of participants had in common, however, was the enthusiasm and generosity with which they approached the debate. Many people gave up substantial amounts of time to take part in workshops and discussion groups, often in the evenings and at weekends. Many respondents to the consultation took the trouble to confer with their colleagues and prepare a detailed and thoughtful submission.

Participants were generous not just with their time, but also in their approach to tackling some of the more difficult and contentious issues. People were bold in offering contributions, humble in recognising the limits of their knowledge or experience and interested in the views of others. As a result the debate was rich

and nuanced, with few polarisations or divides along what might be considered obvious fault lines. In particular, it may have been expected that a debate about the value of the arts would be dominated by arguments for and against funding the arts 'for art's sake' and funding the arts in order to deliver some tangible social and economic outcomes. In recent years this polarisation has become a preoccupation in policy and media circles, where there has been much discussion of the perceived 'instrumentalism' of the arts and calls for greater recognition of their 'intrinsic' value. While similar tensions did arise during the course of the arts debate, in reality these simplistic divides are not recognised by, or relevant to, the majority of people. Experiences of the arts in daily life are complex and diverse, and this was reflected in the sophistication of the debate.

2.3 Impact of the debate

The arts debate involved qualitative research, open consultation and deliberation, and these different methods of data collection produce different kinds of information. Qualitative research and consultation techniques record the current perceptions and opinions of participants, based on their existing levels of knowledge and experience. By contrast, participants in deliberative research have access to a range of background material and are given time to explore and debate issues before coming to any conclusions. Findings from deliberative research therefore reflect more developed opinions – the views that people are likely to come to if they are provided with a certain amount of relevant information. Where appropriate, we distinguish between findings that were gathered through deliberative techniques and those based on qualitative research or consultation.

In all stages of the inquiry, the process of dialogue and debate had an impact on the participants themselves. Many felt that they had discovered ideas and opportunities they never knew existed, surprised themselves by how much they knew or had to say, or developed greater understanding of and respect for different views. In many cases peoples' opinions shifted as a result of their exposure to the experiences of others, particularly during the deliberative stage. This appears to reflect a strong desire and capability among most people to put individual interests and concerns aside and to consider wider issues and the collective good.

3 Arts debate participants: roles and relationships

This section identifies and describes the types of individuals and organisations that took part in the arts debate. It explains how the samples were put together for the various research stages of the inquiry. It also considers the motivations of different individuals and organisations to engage with or work within the arts, and what they expect from their interactions with the arts and with each other. This analysis provides some broad definitions that are used in the rest of the report to explain the extent to which views differ across different groups in the population.

3.1 Arts audiences, participants and the wider public

Members of the public who were recruited to take part in the arts debate were selected to be representative of the population in terms of gender and ethnicity, and to cover all ages and life-stages from 16 upwards and all socio-economic groups. Workshops and discussion groups were held in urban, suburban and rural locations and there were at least two groups conducted in every region of England. The sample was also constructed to include varying levels of interest in and involvement with the arts. Around a quarter of the participants rarely attended or participated in any of a wide range of arts events and activities and would describe themselves as uninterested or unengaged[4]. This group displayed different motivations and expectations to those who attend or participate in the arts at least occasionally. In fact, level of arts experience appeared to have a greater influence on views about the arts than socio-demographic factors.

Those who engaged with the arts were motivated to do so for a number of reasons – the desire for fun, relaxation or excitement; to escape the pressures or tedium of day-to-day working life; to experience something unusual or uplifting or surprising; and for the opportunity to learn something new. For many people the arts are a positive, happy but also challenging aspect of their lives. Participants described the social dimension as particularly important – people associate the arts with friendship, spending time with the family and sharing an experience with others from all walks of life. Those who took part in creative activities themselves were motivated by a desire to express themselves and often saw the arts as part of their sense of personal identity.

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[4] This is broadly representative of the population as a whole – for further details of levels of engagement with the arts in England see *Informing change – Taking Part in the arts: survey findings from the first 12 months*, available at www.artscouncil.org.uk/takingpart

By contrast, those who were less engaged displayed some quite powerful negative feelings towards the arts, particularly in the early qualitative research. Many described a sense of being excluded from something that others enjoy, which in turn creates resentment and hostility. Some people were actively 'anti-arts' in that a lack of engagement with the arts was actually part of their identity – they 'don't do the arts' or the arts 'aren't for people like us'.

Regardless of level of engagement with the arts, most people knew very little about the day-to-day activities of artists, arts organisations and funders and as such had few initial expectations as to what these individuals and organisations might provide or how they should behave. Their closest relationship is with the artist – those with some degree of engagement with the arts described a desire to understand what a particular artist is trying to achieve and to hear the message that the artist is trying to communicate.

3.2 Artists

The artists who were recruited to take part in the arts debate represented a wide variety of practice. The sample included classical, rock and blues musicians, actors, playwrights, dancers, painters, sculptors, photographers, writers, poets and crafts people. The artists were professional in that they made at least some of their living through artistic practice, and included those who were publicly funded as well as those who were partly or entirely commercial. The sample was ethnically diverse, represented every region in England and included artists working at local, national and international levels.

The artists in the sample were characterised by an intense passion for and commitment to the arts. They described a powerful motivation – for many a compulsion – to express themselves creatively and to generate meaning through that expression. For some – particularly visual artists – personal satisfaction is based primarily on how happy they are with the way they expressed themselves in a particular piece of work. However, for many it is also bound up with the idea of reaching out to an audience and connecting with society in some way. Artists described their motivations to share and exchange meaning – not just to express but to communicate with others. Performance artists in particular aspire to produce work that resonates with and excites an audience, that moves people and provokes a response.

As most people will recognise, the relationship between artist and audience emerged as one of the closest and most complex in the ecology. Each depends on the other not just for their personal satisfaction, but for art itself to exist in the form

of an exchange of meaning. Artists also rely on each other for support, critical feedback, camaraderie and a sense of being part of and contributing to the wider arts world. However, many of the artists we spoke to had little awareness of or only a distant relationship with the larger institutions that operate within and support the arts ecology.

3.3 Arts managers and organisations

The term 'arts managers' refers to people working in an administrative or managerial capacity in arts organisations. As with the sample of artists, we covered a range of genres and recruited individuals from theatres, galleries, orchestras, opera and dance companies, record labels and literature and craft organisations across the country. The sample included participatory and community arts organisations and organisations focusing on specific audiences such as young people and disabled groups. We also recruited a number of umbrella groups and representative bodies such as trade unions. Some – but not all – of the organisations in the sample were funded by the Arts Council, either on a regular basis or through funding for specific projects. The size of organisation varied, as did the role of the individual within the organisation – we spoke to chief executives, artistic directors, curators, marketing managers and people working in education and community programmes.

Arts managers described being motivated by a personal passion for the arts and a desire to enable great artistic experiences to happen. Those working in arts organisations with a particular social remit or community focus tend to be particularly driven by what they see as the power of the arts to transform lives and communities. Others appear to be motivated primarily to contribute to the development of the arts and artistic practice.

Arts managers look out in many directions at once – to audiences, to artists and to funders. They tend to have high expectations of other institutions – they look to other arts organisations and particularly funders to support them and the wider ecology in collaborative and effective ways.

3.4 Funders and other stakeholders

The arts debate involved a number of individuals and organisations from the Arts Council's wider stakeholder community. The sample of stakeholders included other arts funders such as local authorities, trusts, foundations and corporate sponsors. It also included organisations that work outside the arts but are affected by or represent people that might be affected by activities within the arts

community. This included regional development agencies, health and education institutions, regeneration agencies and charities and representative bodies.

Many stakeholders are motivated by professional goals that do not relate directly to the production or experience of art. They often see the arts as one of a number of means of achieving those goals. Local authorities and regional agencies aim to contribute to local priorities and to support the economic and social development of their district or region. Trusts and foundations often have strong social motivations – many strive to address injustice and inequality and to support the more disadvantaged groups in society. Corporate sponsors are eclectic in their motivations – their relationship with the arts is generally informed by the specific needs of the business at any given time. In general, most stakeholders want the individuals and groups they represent to be able to access and enjoy arts experiences because of the positive impact they believe it will have on their lives – in the context of the particular goals and remit of their organisation.

Stakeholders described high expectations of the partners they work with and the individuals and organisations they fund. They are generally looking for understanding of their aims and priorities; for integrity and professionalism; and for the arts activities they are involved in to make a demonstrable contribution to some agreed objectives.

3.5 Multiple roles and a diversity of views
The definitions above describe the different groups that took part in the arts debate. Of course individuals and organisations can adopt different roles at different times. Artists are consumers of art themselves. People who work in arts organisations are often both artists and managers. Many people working in funding organisations and other public bodies have a personal passion for the arts. And everyone has a role to play as a citizen of this country. Furthermore, while there is often diversity between groups, there is also huge diversity within groups so that it is difficult to make generalisations and attribute particular schools of thought to particular types of individual or organisation. Nevertheless, these broad distinctions are helpful as we go on to explore shared views on the value of the arts – and points of difference.

4 Shared views

In this section we explore some of the shared views and values that emerged during the course of the arts debate. These views were not necessarily held by every individual that took part – in all cases there was a small number of dissenting voices. However, these are the issues on which there appears to be a broad consensus across the population today, or where people come to a point of agreement fairly quickly and naturally through the process of dialogue and deliberation.

4.1 Defining the arts

The arts debate sought to explore the value of the arts in their broadest sense, not just the kinds of organisations and activities currently supported by the Arts Council. We hoped this would help us better understand our role in the wider ecology. It was therefore important to ensure that the scope of the inquiry was wide. Rather than prescribe a list of events and activities to be considered, we encouraged participants to approach the debate with their own views as to what might be encompassed by 'art' and 'the arts'. We were interested to see how people define and understand these terms today.

Many of the discussion groups and interviews began with a conversation about what is meant by 'art'. As might be expected, this provoked considerable debate and few participants felt they could draw any firm conclusions. Immediate responses among members of the public tended to focus on visual or fine art but, once the discussion got under way, most people quickly developed a broad view. The more people are involved with art in the first place, the broader their definition tends to be, and many members of the public and arts professionals are reluctant to term something as 'not art'. A number of activities were mentioned repeatedly by all groups as examples of how difficult the question can be – there was particular debate about whether sport and television could be forms of art.

Despite the uncertainties, most participants agreed that the notion of art is not completely nebulous and that there were some tangible criteria that made it possible to judge something a work of art. These included an original, creative idea; effort and skill on the part of the artist; and how the audience understands and responds to the piece. Many people – particularly among the arts and stakeholder communities – felt that art is about creative self-expression, often individual and personal, but also about shared experiences.

One of the areas that provoked the strongest and often most negative reactions right across the sample was the type of art that is often referred to as 'conceptual'. Many people – including artists and arts managers – see little skill or effort in this sort of work and do not believe that it stimulates much positive emotional response in its audience. Given the criteria described above, it is unsurprising that not everyone is prepared to incorporate 'conceptual art' within their definition and understanding of art. Further, it is seen by many to create a sense of being excluded from a private conversation within the arts world. Many wonder whether conceptual art takes advantage of audiences, buyers and, particularly where the work is in the public domain, wider communities.

The discussion groups and interviews went on to ask people what they thought constituted 'the arts' these days. Are the arts simply a collection of the diverse set of activities that people think of as art, or are they something different? It appears that members of the public have a narrower view of 'the arts' than of 'art'. The arts are perceived as a smaller set of clearly defined and more traditional activities – theatre, ballet, art galleries. For many people 'art' is part of the fabric of their lives, while 'the arts' are something institutional, and separate from their day-to-day experience of the world. Many artists, arts managers and stakeholders are sympathetic to this view and are unsurprised by its prevalence among the wider population.

In summary, the approach to defining 'art' and 'the arts' emerges as a shared value not because participants were in broad agreement about particular definitions, but because they agreed to disagree and were happy for there not to be any definitive solution. Most readily adopt a broad, inclusive definition of art; view it as an integral part of everyday life; and would like to see 'the arts' become a term with more relevance and more appeal to more people.

4.2 Why the arts matter
Participants in the arts debate spent considerable time considering the extent to which – and why – the arts might be important, both to individuals and to society as a whole. In interviews and workshops participants were asked to share their experiences of the arts, and to assess the potential benefits of a range of different arts activities and organisations. Respondents to the consultation had the opportunity to describe what they value about the arts. Given the definitional issues discussed above, it is important to consider what participants might have meant by 'the arts' when they were expressing ideas of value and benefit. We believe that participants unconsciously developed their own working definition of the term in order to help them navigate their way through the conversation. We

also note that for many this definition would have encompassed a much wider range of activities than those currently supported by public funding.

Over the course of the inquiry a clear picture emerged of the value of the arts to people in England today. They are important in three main ways. Firstly, the arts are seen as part of a fundamental **capacity for life**. In essence this means that they help people to understand, interpret and adapt to the world around them. At an individual level they enable people to express themselves creatively and give form and meaning to emotions that might otherwise be difficult to comprehend. The arts are a means of coping with complexity – they help people to make sense of life and navigate their way through. They contribute to an individual's sense of personal identity and help people to convey this identity to others. The arts are seen as an important means of communication, and provide an alternative language that can help people understand each other better. They allow people to access the perspectives and experiences of others – to see how others live their lives – which in turn broadens their own horizons and leads them to question their assumptions. Indeed this concept of challenge is important for many people – the arts can ask difficult questions, provoke reactions, stimulate debate and encourage people to consider where society has come from and where it might be heading. For some this process is overtly political – the arts are agents of social change, and create a neutral space for political discourse where the voices of the excluded and disenfranchised can be heard. The arts are described by many as inspirational – they stimulate imaginations, encourage people to 'think the unthinkable' and can raise aspirations both for individuals and for humanity.

The second reason the arts matter to people is because they enrich their **experience of life**. The arts bring colour, beauty, passion and intensity to lives. They are an important source of pleasure, entertainment and relaxation. They can offer something unusual or surprising, which can lift people out of the day-to-day pressures and tedium of working life. Indeed for many the arts are a source of escape or solace, particularly when life is otherwise bleak. The arts feed and respond to emotions and are described as exciting, uplifting and nourishing.

Finally, the arts are seen to have **powerful applications** in different contexts and in addressing aims and priorities outside the immediate artistic experience. At an individual level the arts offer an outlet for emotions and a means of expressing what might otherwise be difficult to say. As such they can contribute to overall health and emotional wellbeing. Active participation in the arts can build skills, confidence and self-esteem and is for many an aspect of general education and life-long learning. A number of participants emphasised the importance of the arts

in bringing people together and creating bonds between those from different backgrounds and with different experiences of life. Because the arts can offer a safe place to explore difficult issues, and an alternative shared language, they can contribute to the strength and cohesion of communities. The arts are seen to foster a sense of place, belonging and community identity and to stimulate pride in the local environment. For some, the arts contribute to the regeneration and economic growth of their district or region.

So collectively people believe that the arts matter for a number of rich and complex reasons, and describe their value in three broad domains of capacity, experience and application. However, different individuals and organisations approach the question of value in different ways.

Members of the public with little or no engagement with the arts are least likely to express value in terms of capacity or application. Nevertheless, they do acknowledge why other people might value their experiences of the arts and almost all are keen for their children to be able to access similar opportunities.

Members of the public with some involvement with the arts tended to identify themes such as enjoyment, enrichment and escape. These themes are important to members of the arts community too, who also emphasise the power of the arts in helping people understand, interpret, adapt to and shape the world around them. Concepts of communication, challenge and the broadening of collective horizons become increasingly important for both arts professionals and members of the public through the process of deliberation.

Those working in organisations with a particular social or community remit – especially in the wider stakeholder community – are most likely to refer to the application of the arts in different contexts, particularly education and community development.

However, many participants implicitly or explicitly recognise the connection and overlap between the three domains of value described above. In particular it is rare to find anyone who will express the value of the arts solely in terms of their wider applications. Even those with a professional responsibility and commitment to broader community goals will start a conversation about the value of the arts somewhere in one of the first two domains.

To conclude, many recognise intuitively that the arts are powerful in addressing wider social and economic needs precisely *because* they build capacity for and

experience of life. It appears that their value across all three domains is what makes the arts special to so many people.

4.3 Quality – a critical factor

The theme of 'quality' was a key feature of the arts debate and was referred to in numerous contexts during the course of the inquiry. There is a strong collective sense that the arts in England – and those working in the arts – should be striving to achieve something exceptional at all times. However, the word 'quality' has different connotations for different people, and we found different approaches to its interpretation, definition and assessment.

Members of the public tend to refer first and foremost to **quality of experience**. In this context quality is closely related to the ways in which the arts are valued – a quality experience is something that helps people understand something new about the world or enriches their experience of life in some way. For members of the public, a quality experience is something that audience members and participants really get something out of – it can be provocative or difficult, but it should lift them out of the day-to-day and provide something more than basic entertainment. Thus for members of the public, quality can be judged by understanding the emotional response of the audience to a piece of work and the impact it has in terms of challenging perceptions and broadening horizons.

Many members of the arts and wider stakeholder communities also referred to quality of experience in some way. However, arts professionals were also likely to emphasise **quality of product** – a notion of quality that in some sense exists independently of any audience response and that can presumably be judged according to the level of technical expertise involved and the contribution it makes to a particular artform or body of work. Members of the wider stakeholder community are most likely to refer to **quality of project** – how well an arts organisation or activity is run and the extent to which it meets its objectives. This is often because people working in local authorities, regional agencies or businesses outside the arts world do not always feel they are in a position to or able to judge quality of product – or do not feel they have the tools to assess quality of experience in any depth.

In fact, while there is broad consensus on the importance of worthwhile and well-produced arts experiences, the word 'quality' is problematic for many people. It is seen as a loaded term that only those with a certain degree of knowledge and expertise are entitled to use. Many members of the public and some arts

professionals are more comfortable with words such as 'excitement', 'surprise' and 'enrichment'.

4.4 An appetite for risk

The themes of innovation and risk arose repeatedly during the course of the arts debate and by the end of the process emerged as some of the most important aspects of how people experience of the arts today. Initially there were mixed views about the importance of innovation. Many artists and arts managers saw it as an inherent part of the creative process, and a self-evident goal for any practitioner. Stakeholders tended to feel that artistic innovation was important to a degree in the sense that they had no desire for work that had gone before to be replicated. Members of the public were cautious at first. They felt that artists, arts organisations and arts funders need to take risks and were comfortable with the idea that not every project or idea will 'work'. At the same time, members of the public – and indeed a number of arts professionals and other stakeholders – were concerned that very groundbreaking work can be inaccessible or alienating. However, as participants deliberated on these issues further, they developed a broad consensus that innovation matters – and a clear understanding of why.

The concept of innovation is closely linked to the ways in which people understand the value of the arts. Firstly, they look to the arts for a richer experience of life – for unusual encounters that transport audiences and participants from the everyday. An important part of that experience is being surprised by something new. Further, if the arts are to challenge and to broaden individual and collective horizons then the arts themselves need to keep moving, to push back boundaries and to change the terms of the debate on a continual basis. So people come to see artistic innovation as essential, not as an end in itself but as a means of heightening the overall experience of the arts – even if that experience is sometimes difficult or disturbing.

If artistic innovation is part of the quality of experience for audience members then, in many cases, understanding of what is 'innovative' will depend on the backgrounds and expectations of those experiencing the work. To put it simply, what is new and unusual for one person may be old and familiar for another. What is important overall is the creation of encounters that are surprising and stimulating for those that experience them. So for many participants in the arts debate, innovation is not just about product but also process of engagement – there is a call for practitioners to innovate in the ways they reach, understand and communicate with their audiences.

By the end of the inquiry there was a shared sense that innovation and risk-taking are not a privilege but a responsibility of artists, arts organisations and funders of the arts in all aspects of their work[5]. A failure of innovation in the arts is also a failure of public value.

4.5 More creative lives
We have seen so far that most participants in the arts debate believe that the arts matter and are valuable to individuals and to society. We've also seen that many people have an appetite for new creative encounters and a desire to be surprised and challenged through the arts. There was also a strong consensus right across the sample that as many people as possible should be able to access and enjoy such experiences. Some participants were keen to point out that in theory, given the diverse and subjective nature of the arts, everybody should be able to find something that resonates with them and brings colour and joy into their lives. However, there was also a very strong sense that in reality, that's not quite how it works right now. Too many people either don't take up the opportunities that are available to them or can't access or are excluded from what the arts have to offer.

In the early qualitative research, members of the public described what they saw as the barriers to greater involvement with the arts. For the most part these appear to be psychological rather than physical. The arts are a risk – and while that's part of the attraction, it can also put people off. Participants in discussion groups described a reluctance to try something new in the arts because they are afraid that they might not enjoy it, or that it won't be 'worth it'. These fears are often compounded by intellectual or social concerns: What if I don't understand or know how to respond? What if I don't fit in? What if people look down on me? And – when it comes to active participation – what if I'm no good? For many it's a matter of personal risk – when they think about it, the potential gains seem very high, but a lot of the time it's more comfortable not to take the chance.

Themes of reach and inclusion were picked up by arts professionals and the wider stakeholder community, where increasing public engagement is a very high priority for almost all. The majority believe that arts organisations in particular have a responsibility to be as open and accessible as possible and for many this includes actively reaching out to new audiences, particularly those who currently have little or no engagement with the arts. Arts professionals and stakeholders are conscious that levels of engagement with the arts are bound up with complex

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[5] This has been a recurrent theme in debates about the arts and their funding – see for example *Towards a National Arts and Media Strategy,* 1992

issues of education and class – so much so, in fact, that many take a stance against anything they see as 'elitism' and are concerned that the arts remain the preserve of the privileged few. The work of stakeholders in particular is often imbued with principles of equality and social justice. When they are working in the arts it is often in order to widen participation and to help make the arts more accessible to specific audiences. Indeed many recognise that the arts are at their most powerful when they engage the most disenfranchised.

However, some wonder whether it is controlling or patronising to insist that everyone should be out there enjoying the arts, particularly if it means trying to pursue certain audiences and making assumptions about what will and won't appeal to them. Indeed members of the public were clear that everyone can be uncomfortable about stepping outside their comfort zone, regardless of their particular financial, social or cultural background. As such the issue seems to be less about addressing the needs of specific groups and more about starting an inclusive conversation about the arts that more people feel they can be part of. In this context the concept of empowerment came to be seen as equal to, if not more important than, that of access. In one sense this means respecting where people start from in their relationship with the arts, recognising that the next step on everyone's journey is different, and developing a collective narrative about the arts that reflects the huge diversity of experiences. At a more practical level it means equipping people with the information, knowledge, tools and confidence to seek out the arts experiences that are valuable to them and helping everyone to build their own, more creative lives.

4.6 A role for public funding
The final key point of consensus to emerge during the course of the arts debate was broad support for the principle of public funding for the arts. The arts are seen as important and valuable and therefore an appropriate use of taxpayers' money. Participants in the early qualitative research spent some time considering current levels of funding for the arts and comparing them with levels of expenditure on other public services such as health and defence. There was a general sense that at a national level the balance was about right, with the arts receiving a relatively small but not insignificant proportion of every household's weekly tax contribution[6].

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[6] Participants were informed that the Arts Council costs each UK household 39p per week and that by comparison the NHS costs each UK household around £80 per week.

There was also broad agreement on the kind of role that public funding for the arts might best play. We have seen the importance people place on artistic innovation and risk, as well as a desire for the arts to be closer to and play a larger role in the lives of more people. There was a general perception that neither of these things is likely to occur if the market is left to its own devices. It was also felt that the very notion of public funding brings with it a sense of legitimacy and collective ownership. Greater awareness of public funding for the arts might therefore encourage people to feel as though the arts are relevant to them and that they are entitled to experience more of what's on offer.

However, when it comes to public funding, the real issue is not whether or why – it is how. During the course of the inquiry there was considerable debate about the specific outcomes that public funding should seek to achieve, the weights that should be applied to different outcomes, how decisions are made and the ways in which funds are allocated. In particular, there was much discussion of how widespread the reach of public funding of the arts should be, in terms of the number and diversity of the people who benefit, and the implications of this for fostering innovative and high quality artistic practice. As we will see, these issues gave rise to some of the most difficult tensions to emerge during the course of the arts debate.

5 Points of tension

In this section we explore the themes that emerged as most contentious during the course of the arts debate. These are the areas where there was most disagreement, often between particular groups of participants, and where positions were most vehemently supported or opposed. These are also the areas where individual participants were most uncertain or uncomfortable – often they could see strengths and weaknesses in different aspects of the argument and were reluctant to come down on one side or the other.

5.1 A right to express or the need to engage?

It appears that at the core of any debate about the arts and their funding lies a fundamental tension that practitioners in the arts live with on a day-to-day basis. This is the tension between the individual right to artistic expression and the desire to engage and connect with others. At heart, artists wish to be true to their own artistic voice – to interpret the world as they see it and to express themselves creatively through the medium that comes most naturally to them. Many artists describe this as something innate – something they were 'born' to do – and can't imagine themselves doing anything else. They want the freedom to continue their artistic journey through life and hope that the world will be a better place in some way as a result. At the same time, almost all artists are motivated by a desire to communicate with others – to convey a message and provoke a response. As one participant in the arts debate put it, being an artist is about 'waving to people in the hope they'll wave back'. Indeed for many the value of their work depends on the reaction of an audience. To be successful, a work must move people emotionally or intellectually. What happens, then, when an audience fails to be moved? Is the work flawed in some way? Or has the audience failed to understand or respond in the right way? Is the work simply playing to the wrong people? Artists find themselves in the difficult position of relying on their audiences to validate their work – but not necessarily confident that their audiences share their artistic vision and values.

This tension leads many to question the extent to which an artist should adapt their original idea in order to produce work that more people will understand and respond to. Does there come a point when the desire to connect with people compromises artistic vision and integrity? This question is often particularly pronounced for managers in arts organisations. They are seeking not just to create but to put together a programme of activity that supports the mission of their organisation and touches enough people to enable their organisation to thrive, whether in the market or within the public funding system. For many practitioners

this isn't a problem – it's part of the fun and part of the challenge. For commercial artists and organisations in particular, having to find an audience keeps them alert and helps prevent their work from stagnating.

So this fundamental tension between artistic expression and wider engagement would exist with or without a system of public funding. It appears to be inherent in the creative process and in the relationship between artist and audience, and is presumably as old as the concept of art itself. However, it is in the context of public funding that this tension becomes truly problematic. For some this is because public funding can reduce the need for artists and arts organisations to seek out new audiences. They argue that subsidy is often best served in small and time-limited doses; an excess can lead to complacency and dependency, and dull the sharpness of the relationship between artist and audience. For others, this tension gives rise to difficult arguments around benefit to the public, accountability and the decision-making process.

5.2 Broad or deep? Benefit to the public and artistic development

One of the main sources of tension throughout the course of the inquiry was a debate about how widespread the benefits of public funding of the arts should be. Participants were relatively clear about why they value the arts and were in broad agreement on a role for public funding, particularly in supporting artistic innovation and public engagement. However, they were much more divided on the degree of priority that should be placed on achieving widespread benefit to the public when making individual funding decisions.

At the heart of this debate lies a concern about whether it is appropriate to use public money to support individual artists. Many members of the public feel that if an individual artist is given a grant to develop an idea or produce their next piece of work, the benefits accrue to an individual and not to wider society. There is particular concern if an artist goes on to achieve commercial success. Why should an artist receive an extra boost to their career above and beyond the financial support and training available to any business or entrepreneur? And if public money is used to fund individuals, how do funders choose between the millions of aspiring young artists out there? A number of arts managers and stakeholders share this view, although unsurprisingly many artists argue strongly in favour of appropriate support at critical stages of their careers.

The debate about the breadth of benefit to the public applies not just to the question of individual artists, but to the overall criteria that should be employed when making funding decisions about any arts organisation or activity. During the

qualitative research and consultation stages of the inquiry, members of the public, arts professionals and the wider stakeholder community were divided as to what the most important criteria should be. Members of the public would like to see principles such as access and reach at the top of list, reflecting a strong desire for public funding to benefit as many people as possible. Organisations with a particular social remit – within both the arts and wider stakeholder communities – support this view and often take it further. As well as widespread access, they would like public funding to focus on achieving some tangible social outcomes that benefit not just those who take part in the funded activity but the wider community as well. They are also most likely to emphasise the importance of principles such as diversity and equality. Finally, many artists and those working in arts organisations without a particular social remit are likely to prioritise artistic excellence and the breaking of new ground before anything else.

So there are real differences of opinion as to what the most important criteria are for arts funding decisions. And among the professional community, the debate is not just about what the priorities should be, but about what they actually are at the moment. For individuals and organisations working within a particular social or community context, public funding for the arts appears to be biased towards 'elite', high profile establishments and to pay lip service to social inclusion agendas. For more mainstream artists and arts organisations, public funding has become a political tool, preoccupied with diversity and disadvantage at the expense of genuine artistic quality. Even funded organisations can find it difficult to reconcile their perceptions with the reality of their own position within the system.

5.3 Accountability in theory – bureaucracy in practice?

Another key tension arose for almost all participants in the arts debate around the issue of accountability. When it comes to public funding, the concept of accountability is very important to everyone, both in terms of how funders account for the way they distribute public money and how recipients of funding account for what they achieve with their share. However, there was also concern about the potential for very rigid systems of accountability to stifle creativity and to hold back the development of artistic practice.

The starting point for the accountability debate is typically a lack of understanding of how decisions are currently made about arts funding, particularly at the Arts Council. Members of the public generally know very little about the system of public funding of the arts, but they are interested in and concerned about the decision-making process. Who makes the decisions and on what basis? Whose interests do they represent? Artists, arts organisations and stakeholders are not

much the wiser. They describe the system as opaque, particularly the process by which an arts organisation comes to be funded by the Arts Council on a regular basis. There was a strong call right across the sample for greater clarity and transparency – but mixed views as to how this might best be achieved.

Some would like the Arts Council to develop and publish more fixed and objective criteria on which to base funding decisions. Stakeholders in particular are likely to support this approach and apply it to their own work. However, even those organisations working in highly regulatory environments – local authorities, and health and education institutions – can be uneasy about focusing on easily measurable criteria. They feel responsible for maintaining rigour and transparency in their decision-making processes but sense that this may limit their ability to recognise and support some of the more intangible qualities of arts projects and organisations. Similarly, while accountability is very important for members of the public, they are concerned about time-consuming and expensive forms of bureaucracy. Artists are particularly vocal about the perceived dangers of box ticking and quantification, and the potential for accountability requirements to hold back the creative process or even skew artistic vision and intent. As such some members of the arts community would like to see arts funders – particularly the Arts Council – use their judgement and instinct a little more, and to trust artists and arts organisations to get on with what they've been funded to do.

In the professional community the debate takes an interesting turn when people consider the responsibilities of publicly funded arts organisations in greater depth. Many arts organisations participating in the debate described a deep sense of accountability to their audiences, their funders and to the artists they work with. There is no disagreement that as recipients of public money they should govern and manage themselves effectively; monitor and evaluate their performance; and report on what they've achieved with their share of the public purse. What causes aggravation is the sense of being shoehorned into what are perceived as irrelevant or inflexible accountability systems of funders, particularly those of the Arts Council. Artists and arts organisations want to be accountable, but with greater engagement with and ownership of the process.

5.4 Expert judgement or inclusive consultation?
A final and closely related argument to take place during the course of the arts debate centred on the extent to which members of the public should be involved in arts funding decisions. As we have seen, many members of the public are concerned about how decisions are currently made. In particular, they are worried that the decision makers may be a small, closed group of experts who are not

necessarily in touch with the needs and priorities of the wider population, and do not know enough about how 'ordinary people' experience the arts today. In the initial stages of the inquiry there was therefore a strong call for members of the public to be given a greater role in the decision-making process.

Subsequent stages of research and consultation explored this issue in more depth with arts professionals and other stakeholders. Here there were mixed views about the appropriateness of greater public involvement. Some were very supportive of the idea, either in the general spirit of openness and democracy; or to ensure that the work being funded remains fresh and diverse; or as a means of encouraging greater public engagement with and ownership of the arts. Others – particularly artists – reacted against the idea, arguing that public committees would end up making conservative or 'safe' decisions, discouraging innovation and leading to an inevitable 'dumbing down' of the arts. Most professionals, however, were torn on the issue. They felt that arts funding decisions should reflect and respond to the changing needs of communities, particularly at a local level. At the same time they saw an essential role for experts in maintaining breadth of artistic vision, taking risks and assessing quality. Further, many were uncertain about the practical implications of involving members of the public in a meaningful way – particularly the challenge of ensuring a representative group of participants who are willing and able to give up the time to get involved.

One of the interesting features of the deliberation was how views on this issue shifted for both members of the public and arts professionals. By the end of the process members of the public had an increased respect for the role of experts – they recognised how difficult the decision-making process could be and were less sure about the appropriateness of public involvement at every stage. By contrast, some members of the arts community came to feel that members of the public could bring a great deal to the process and should be more involved. Overall there remained a strong sense that a wider range of voices – both professional and public – should be engaged in decision-making in some way.

6 The search for balance

Almost all of the participants in the arts debate were aware of or came to be aware of the tensions described above, particularly in the context of public funding. One of the aspects that differentiates people most is how comfortable they are living and working with these tensions and the extent to which they think points of difference can be reconciled. At one end of the spectrum there is a minority who believe that the problems are intractable and that the funding system should adopt and adhere to a single priority or principle – for example, basing decisions solely on the basis of artistic quality at the expense of everything else if necessary; or funding only those projects, artists or organisations that can demonstrate how their work will contribute directly to clear social or economic outcomes. At the other end of the spectrum there is a small number of mostly arts and stakeholder organisations that believe these tensions can be completely reconciled – they feel they have found a place where quality, innovation, engagement and accountability operate in perfect harmony. The majority of participants, however, were searching for some sort of balance, both in their own work and in their expectations of public funding.

During the deliberation, members of the public and arts professionals worked hard together to find a position on the priorities and principles of public funding for the arts that they felt could accommodate most needs and aspirations. Effectively the process they went through was to distinguish more clearly between means and ends. They concluded that the ultimate end of public funding for the arts should indeed be the creation of 'public value' in terms of the three domains described earlier, strengthening capacity for and experience of life in a wide range of contexts. However, they also concluded that to a certain extent it should be taken as given that this sort of value will be created naturally if as many people as possible experience arts that excite, enlighten, move, stimulate and challenge. As such, they would like the public funding system to focus on enabling widespread **quality of artistic experience**. The twin priorities of artistic excellence and public engagement become critical means of achieving this overarching ambition. And artistic excellence and public engagement will themselves be achieved if the public funding system abides by a number of core principles: risk-taking, innovation, development of artistic practice, fairness, inclusiveness, access and variety in terms of the artistic opportunities and experiences available to people.

Participants in the arts debate would like to see the Arts Council develop real clarity around its mission and priorities. The inquiry generated a strong call for a bold, dynamic and independent funding body driving the development of the arts in

England. There is a desire for the Arts Council to take a stronger stand when it needs to on the very real tensions between artistic development and wider benefit, and between creativity and accountability – and to defend that stand robustly despite inevitable opposition from other parts of the system. But it seems that no funding system should try to iron out the tension inherent in the creative process around the singularity of the artistic voice and the collective desire to communicate and share experiences with others. Rather this seems a tension to be enjoyed, celebrated and debated on an ongoing basis.

7 Conclusions

For the Arts Council, the arts debate has been a hugely valuable and illuminating process, and we have learned much about how people in England think and feel about the arts today. We've developed a clearer picture of the public value of the arts in their broadest sense, and a better understanding of how different individuals and organisations within the arts ecology contribute to creating that value. We've uncovered a collective desire for new, surprising, exciting encounters with the arts, and seen how important innovation and public engagement are to the health of the arts ecology and the value it creates. We have also seen that there is an important role for public funding within this ecology, but that everyone in the system needs to manage the associated tensions a little more constructively.

Our early response at the Arts Council is that there is clearly a call for an ambitious and wide-reaching programme of public investment in the arts – one that maintains a deep commitment to and focus on the quality of artistic experience. We believe that the challenge is to develop a system that:
- has real clarity of shared mission
- prioritises innovation and public engagement as critical means of achieving that mission
- is flexible enough in its funding to give different weight to different principles at different times
- encompasses a wider range of voices in its decision-making processes
- has appropriate forms of accountability that can vary according to the nature of its work

We look forward to working in partnership with all our publics as we develop our approach to addressing these challenges over the coming months and years.

Finally, we note that the arts debate is not the end of the conversation. How people perceive value shifts over time, and we must understand the changing needs and priorities of all the communities we serve. The arts debate is helping the Arts Council to become a more outward looking, listening, responsive organisation. It has also uncovered a widespread enthusiasm for debating and exploring what the arts mean to individuals and to society as a whole. We are therefore committed to continuing this important dialogue about the value of the arts, the role of public funding and our own priorities and principles in the future.

The arts debate was the Arts Council's first public value inquiry. It was a wide-reaching programme of research and consultation to explore how people think and feel about the arts and their priorities for public funding. The debate involved Arts Council staff, members of the public, artists, arts managers, local authorities and other key stakeholders in several hundred interviews, discussion groups and deliberative events. There were also over 1,200 contributions to the open consultation.

This report brings together the findings from all the different stages of the inquiry to provide an overall account of the public value of the arts in England today.