

Let's Create? - Arts Council England's Strategy 2020-2030

1 Summary

The Arts Council has launched a new ten year strategy which they say is not dreamed up by a bunch of bureaucrats sitting in a room on their own – well tough as this is what it reads like out of touch and given the resources probably unachievable.

Musicians, dancer, painters, poets, writer, singers have been conveniently dumped into a box marked “Creative Practioners”. This is one size fits all and ignores the diversity of expression. Culture has been reduced to an homogenous blob and creativity has been simplified to a uniform act, a level playing field in which the participants are all the same.

A fundamental flaw in “Let's Create is the complete absence of any art form policy.

After 10 years of “*Great Art and Culture for Everyon*”e the Arts Council has yet to nail the question of what constitutes high quality or quality period, and spending another 10 years attempting to establish a shared language that will define quality.

The Arts Council's failure to resolve inequality in its last ten year Strategic Plan should be publicly scrutinised and they should be held to account.

The Arts Council has moved from the objects of its Royal Charter to a vision that is flawed for a number of reasons; is it achievable given existing resources?

The Arts Council has yet to produce an operational plan for the execution of Let's Create. Without that it is a bit like a vet asking “Is this horse fit for work?” Without a urine sample.

No further reply was forthcoming so had an internal appraisal of the Arts Council been undertaken with an analysis of its capabilities and core competences?

Enquiries to the Arts Council at the time of the development of Let's Create failed to provide an internal appraisal of the Arts Council with an analysis of its capabilities and core competences.

2 Background to the strategy Let's Create

The Arts Council England published its 10 year strategy Let's Create2020-2030 on the 27th January 2020. The delivery plan for the strategy is expected in April 2020.

In the Guardian the ACE chief executive, Darren Henley said it had not been developed “*by a bunch of bureaucrats sitting in a room on their own*” but after a long period of consultation with professionals, audiences and potential audiences. ”.(please see <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2020/jan/27/arts-council-england-culture-in-every-village-town-and-city-strategy-lets-create>)

Let's Create lists a number of important issues requiring action. They include:

- Persistent and widespread lack of diversity across the creative industries and in publicly funded cultural organisations.
- Difference in understanding of the terms “arts” and “culture” across the country, with many seeing the “arts” as only the high arts.
- Big differences in cultural engagement, geographically and socioeconomically.
- Unequal opportunities for children outside school across the country.
- The often fragile business models of publicly funded cultural organisations.
- A retreat from innovation, risk-taking and sustained talent development.

The previous strategy, “*Great Art For Everyone*” ran from 2010 to 2020 and included five long-term goals. These were:

- Goal 1: Talent and artistic excellence are thriving and celebrated.
- Goal 2: More people experience and are inspired by the arts.
- Goal 3: The arts are sustainable, resilient and innovative.
- Goal 4: The arts leadership and workforce are diverse and highly skilled.
- Goal 5: Every child and young person has the opportunity to experience the richness of the arts.

The important issues listed for action in Let's Create are many the same issues that the five goals in "Great Art For Everyone", were supposed to achieve; diversity, more people experiencing the arts and culture, in fact the only important issue missing from "Great Art For Everyone" is a retreat from innovation and risk taking.

3. General observations

3.1 Culture, Creativity, DCMS and art form policy

Reading the strategy was the mental equivalent of chewing rubber spaghetti compounded by the flawed thinking of one size fits all in terms of "culture" and "creativity" For example page 12 contains a disingenuous, illogical and tortuous definition of culture:

"..we use it to mean all those areas of activity associated with the art forms and organisations which Arts Council England invests in collections, combined arts, dance, libraries, literature, museums, music, theatre and the visual arts. By describing all of this work collectively as 'culture' rather than separately as 'the arts' 'museums' and libraries', we aim to be inclusive of the full breadth of activity that we support as well as to reflect the findings from the research we commissioned for this Strategy, which showed that members of the public tend to use the words 'the art's and 'artists' to refer specifically to classical music, opera, ballet or the fine arts. Similarly we have used 'creative practioners' rather than 'artists' as an umbrella term for all those who work to create new or reshaping existing cultural content." (Let's Create p12)

This is the semantics of a "bunch of bureaucrats sitting in a room on their own". Instead of painters, sculptors, dance, ballet, theatre, literature, classical musicians, poets, writers, folk musicians, jazz musicians, rap artists, brass bands and so forth we have one size fits all. This definition ignores the diversity of expression that comprises each art form, the concept of marketing and the marketing of different art forms. It also completely ignores the needs of the artist and the audiences which will be different for each art form. So what happens to a jazz club or an opera house, a theatre or a concert hall? Are they going to be branded as "Culture Houses" or from a Stalinist dystopian world, "Palaces of Culture"?

Having simplified "culture" to a homogenous blob "Creativity" is next on the list and it is shoehorned into:

".....the process through which people applies their knowledge, skill and intuition to imagine, conceives, express or make something that wasn't there before. While creativity is present in all areas of life, in this Strategy, we use it specifically to refer to the process of making, producing or participating in culture" (Let's Create p12)

"Creativity" has been reduced to the banal with a definition that is ideally suited to the "bunch of bureaucrats sitting in a room on their own". In Let's Create creativity has been simplified to a uniform act, a level playing field in which the participants are all the same. Diversity of art form is redacted and the definition of creativity wilfully ignores "the history of discovery is full of [such] arrivals at unexpected destinations and arrivals at the right destination by the wrong boat" (The Act of Creation, Koestler, 1964, p145). Or that the creative act "is an act of liberation – the defeat of habit by originality." (Koestler 1964 p96)

It would be fair comment to say that perhaps an implicit part of Lets Create was to align itself in some way with its funder the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport who's Single Departmental Plan 2019 has the following objective and actions contributing to Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's). The actions applicable to the Arts Council are set out below:

“Objective 4: Maximise social action, cultural, sporting and physical activity participation”

This will be achieved by the following actions that contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG’s) and are applicable to Arts Council England:

- *“Build a sustainable future for libraries. In partnership with the Libraries Taskforce, Arts Council, and British Library we will promote how public libraries contribute to wider central and local government strategic priorities (contributes to SDG 4*
- *Support UK arts and culture, promote its role in delivering positive social outcomes through effective policy making and public investment (contributes to SDG 11)*
- *Make public appointments and empower DCMS Arms Length Bodies to be effective, resilient and innovative. We will lead the process for chair and trustee appointments to 42 Arms Length Bodies, 15 of which are made by the Prime Minister or HM The Queen. Work to ensure that public appointments made contribute to realising the ambition that by 2022, 50% of all public appointees are female and 14% of all public appointments made are from ethnic minorities (contributes to SDG 10)*
- *Support people of all ages to thrive, connect with each other, and give back to their communities, including our commitment to using Office for National Statistics’ recommended measurement package as government’s standard way of measuring loneliness (contributes to SDG 10)*
- *Increase participation in arts and culture by extending the reach, innovation and resilience in the cultural sector through our delivery of the Culture is Digital report (contributes to SDG 8)*
- *Preserve museums/galleries/cultural property for the enjoyment and education of citizens by supporting as many visitors as possible to enjoy our national collections, especially through free entry to permanent collections (contributes to SDG 16)*
- *Deliver the 2022 UK Festival (contributes to SDG 8)”*

The crucial point is the DCMS has not abandoned the word “Arts” and the compelling phrase is *“delivering positive social outcomes through effective policy making and public investment”*. Here in lies another fundamental flaw in “Let’s Create which is the complete absence of any art form policy.

3.2 Ten years of Great Art For Everyone and Arts Council England still has to tackle the question of quality.

The strategy in its vision that by 2030 everyone will have will have access to a *“remarkable range of high-quality cultural experiences”* (Let’s Create p14). Well no one could argue with that laudable, maybe pious hope but nevertheless a reasonable vision. High-quality is mentioned on a number of occasions;

“In this Strategy, we are drawing a distinction between the two (Creativity and Culture) because we want everyone to have more opportunities for both to be creative and experience high-quality culture” (Let’s Create p15)

“Creating opportunities for children and young people to reach their creative potential and to access highest quality cultural experiences” (Let’s Create p18)

So far, so good until you arrive at the investment principle *“Ambition and Quality”* on page 47. It is as if the Arts Councils previous strategy, *“Great Art and Culture for Everyone”*, 2010-2020 had not existed. Goal 1 was *“Talent and artistic excellence are thriving and celebrated”*. One would have thought that in 10 years the Arts Council would have formulated the notion of what determines artistic excellence and by implication quality and ensured that its funded organisations were turning out work of the highest quality. This appears not to be the case as the strategy states:

“Judgements about quality are inevitable complex and open to debate. We will therefore continue to work with the cultural sector to establish a shared language around it, which we will draw on as we consider and explain our investment decisions. But in the end it will be the Arts Councils responsibility to use our experience and expertise to make the judgements that determine these decisions”. (Let’s Create p 47)

After 10 years of *“Great Art and Culture for Everyone* the Arts Council has yet to nail the question of what constitutes high quality or quality period, and Arts Council England is going to spend another 10 years working with the cultural sector to establish a shared language that will define quality. The reality is that you end up with a *“bunch of bureaucrats sitting in a room on their own”* and developing a *“shared language”* that will end up as a lingua franca of the cultural establishment with little or no resonance with audiences, artists or arts consumers. Furthermore Koestler argued that language can become an obstacle to creative thought and that *“true creativity often starts where language ends”* (Koestler 1964 p177).

This whole lamentable exercise is redolent of Little Dorritt, *“Whatever was required to be done, the Circumlocution Office was beforehand with all the public departments in the art of perceiving — HOW NOT TO DO IT”*.

3.3 The lack of diversity across the creative industries and in publicly funded cultural organisations.

In the Governments Culture White Paper, 2016 The DCMS stated that they:

“... will work with Arts Council England to understand the barriers that prevent people from particularly under-represented groups becoming professionals in the arts”. (Culture White Paper 2016 p 25)

The Arts Council in Goal 4 in its Strategic Plan for 2010-2020 stated: *“The arts leadership and workforce are diverse and highly skilled”*. Yet 10 years later an Arts Council report says: *“Persistent and widespread lack of diversity across the creative industries and in publicly funded cultural organisations”*. And action is required. I am sure the reader will forgive the rhetorical question but, *“What has the Arts Council been doing for the past 10 years? The world of Arts Council funded organisations abounds with “lack of diversity”*. The London Symphony Orchestra for example. A count of the orchestra members reveals 86 orchestra members of which only five came from the diverse community when to reflect the demographics of the UK population it should be around 13 members if not more. Glyndebourne Opera (Glyndebourne Productions Ltd) received £6,516,220 as a National Portfolio Organisation in the 4 year period 2018-2022. Yet its board as at the 11th April 2020, on its website, comprised six trustees of whom one trustee was female and no representation from the diverse community.

In fairness to the Arts Council to tackle inequality across the arts in the public and private sectors would be a Herculean task however there is no excuse in terms of its own client roster and Arts Council funded organisations. In fact the Arts Council’s failure to resolve inequality in its last ten year Strategic Plan should be publicly scrutinised and they should be held to account.

4 The Arts Council Charter and Let’s Create

The Consolidated Royal Charter (Incorporates 2008, 2011 and 2013 amendments) for the Arts Council England contains the following objectives:

“The objects of the Council shall be, for the public benefit, to:

(1) develop and improve the knowledge, understanding and practice of the arts;

(2) increase accessibility of the arts to the public in England; and

(3) advance the education of the public and to further any other charitable purpose which relates to the establishment, maintenance and operation of museums and libraries (which are either public or from which the public may benefit) and to the protection of cultural property; and

(4) advise and co-operate, where it is appropriate to do so, with the Departments of Our Government, Our Scottish Administration, the Northern Ireland Executive and the Welsh Ministers, local authorities, the Arts Councils and equivalent organisations in the museums and libraries sector for Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland (or their successors) and other bodies on any matter related to the objects” https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Consolidated_Royal_Charter_2013.pdf

Let's Create states that:

“Arts Council England is the national development agency for creativity and culture” (Let's Create p 18).

The Arts Council appears to have confused alchemy with reality by the transmutation of the reasonable and proper concept, enshrined in the Royal Charter, of developing and improving the *“knowledge, understanding and practise of the arts and the accessibility of the arts to the public in England”* into the *“national development agency for creativity and culture”* a panacea which aims to:

“recognise and champion the creative activities and cultural experiences of every person in every town, village and city in the country and to ensure that over the next 10 years, we support more people to express and develop their creativity and culture, given their power to fulfil us and to transform the communities in which we live and work. And we will do this because we want England to strengthen its reputation as one of the most creative countries in the world”. (Let's Create p15).

The Arts Council envisages by 2030:

“a country transformed by its culture and at the same time constantly transforming it: a truly create nation in which every one of us can play a part”. (Let's Create p15)

The published vision on page 14 of Let's Create:

“By 2030, we want England to be a country in which the creativity of each us is valued and given the chance to flourish and where every one of us has access to a remarkable range of high-quality cultural experiences”.

There is an overwhelming sense of incredulity about Let's Create. The Arts Council has moved from the objects of its Royal Charter to a vision that is flawed for a number of reasons; is it achievable given existing resources? The vision is certainly challenging but will it inspire the very people it is supposed to serve? Is the vision something that everyone can collectively own and share?

The primary objective of a vision is to inspire and create a shared sense of purpose. Will the person on the Clapham Omnibus or the Manchester tram buy into this vision or will it mean anything to them?

The vision is usually finalised half way through the strategic planning process so let us examine Let's Create in terms of strategic planning.

5 Let's Create and strategic planning

The Arts Council has yet to produce an operational plan for the execution of Let's Create. Without that it is a bit like a vet asking “Is this horse fit for work?” Without a urine sample.

However it would be useful to define exactly what strategy is. Strategy is:

*“...the **direction** and **scope** of an organisation over the **long-term**: which achieves **advantage** for the organisation through its configuration of **resources** within a challenging **environment**, to meet the needs of **markets** and to fulfil **stakeholder** expectations”.* (Johnson, Scholes and Whittington, 2008)

This definition is equally applicable to commercial or not for profit organisations.

The fundamental resources for Arts Council England are clearly finance – funding from the DCMS and lottery funding. But what of the capability and the core competences of the organisation? These

are usually identified in an internal appraisal and eventual feature in an analysis of the internal strengths and weaknesses of the organisation and the external opportunities and threats the organisation faces – the technical term is a SWOT analysis.

The Arts Council held an initial consultation exercise and one of the questions the Arts Council posed was what were the opportunities and threats faced by the arts? I wrote to the company who were organising the consultation and asked:

January 22, 2018 at 9:03pm

“Has the Arts Council developed a paper outlining their strengths and weaknesses? This would be helpful in looking at the opportunities and threats. Thank you”.

And then wrote again:

February 9, 2018 at 5:41pm

“You have asked what are the opportunities and threats facing the arts in the UK. However there is an important part of the equation that needs to be addressed which is the strengths and weaknesses of not just the arts in the UK but the major funders as well”.

I finally received a reply:

26 February 2018 at 11:45

“I have followed up with Arts Council England regarding your specific query about a paper outlining their strengths and weaknesses and will let you know when I hear back on this”

No further reply was forthcoming so had an internal appraisal of the Arts Council been undertaken with an analysis of its capabilities and core competences?

Without this analysis then a strategy may well not be efficiently executed.

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August 2020