

## **Artistic and Quality assessment**



### **Arts Council England**

Arts Council England champions, develops and invests in artistic and cultural experiences that enrich people's lives. We support a range of activities across the arts, museums and libraries – from theatre to digital art, reading to dance, music to literature and crafts to collections.

Great art and culture inspires us, brings us together and teaches us about ourselves and the world around us. In short, it makes life better. Between 2015 and 2018, we will invest £1.1 billion of public money from government and an estimated £700 million from the National Lottery to help create these experiences for as many people as possible across the country.

### **Artistic and Quality Assessment (AQA)**

Our strategic framework is underpinned by a determination to support the arts and cultural sector to pursue excellence in all it does; by which we mean the creation of work of artistic and cultural excellence and the way this work engages with audiences. We acknowledge that excellence is difficult to define, and that it will always be, quite rightly, the subject of debate.

In Great art and culture for everyone we acknowledge that 'excellence' is difficult to define, but we believe that it is possible to agree more rigorous definitions of 'excellence' with the sector. These will be used to help shape our investment decisions, measure the effectiveness of our work and support organisations within the sector to improve the quality of their work.

One of the ways we do this is through **Artistic and Quality assessments** that provide a fair, robust and transparent platform for discussions about the quality of work produced by organisations that the Arts Council regularly funds. This helps the Arts Council develop a broader evidence base to inform funding decisions and for reporting on the extent to which we are meeting our stated Goal to support excellent work.

In response to this Arts Council England expanded the scope of its Assessment programme to include Museums, participatory work and programmed work. The programme, which re-launched as Artistic and Quality Assessment (AQA) in October 2014, continues to assess the work of our National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs) and Major Partner Museums (MPMs).

### **Artistic and Quality Assessment**

The aim of Artistic and Quality Assessment is to provide a fair, robust and

transparent platform for discussions about quality of work and to develop a broad evidence base which will inform the Arts Council's funding decisions.

This will help:

- Contribute to the Arts Council's broader evidence base for reporting on the extent to which we are meeting our stated Goal to fund excellent work
- Contribute to better discussions about quality of work between Arts Council relationship managers and NPOs / MPMs
- NPOs / MPMs reflect on the quality of their work
- Support NPOs / MPMs own improvement and self-evaluation processes

The assessors' role is to experience the work of our funded organisations (for example, a show, a concert, an exhibition or a publication) and each time to write a report for the Arts Council assessing the quality of that work. Artistic and Quality Assessments are shared with organisations and may provide a useful context for their own conversations about quality.

The Artistic and Quality Assessments are written on a template provided by the Arts Council. The template covers a range of elements that contribute to the quality of the work as a whole. We expect completed reports to contain fair, balanced and honest judgments about artistic quality based on sound evidence and that those judgments are explained clearly. Upon completion assessments are sent to both the organisation and their Arts Council relationship manager. Although we do not currently publish them, the artistic and quality assessments are disclosable under the Freedom of Information Act, including the names of the assessors. We publish the names of all our assessors on our website, along with a short biography. The current list is available here

<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/national-portfolio-organisations/artistic-and-quality-assessment>

Assessors come from a range of backgrounds, including artists, arts managers, journalists, academics, museum specialists and others.

### **New areas of work**

In October 2014 the Artistic and Quality Assessment programme expanded to incorporate three new areas of work:

- Work programmed by NPOs
- Participatory work by NPOs
- Museums (MPMs) and quality assessment

Until October 2014 work assessed must be created, commissioned, produced or performed by the NPO; work solely presented by an organisation was therefore not eligible. Festivals were included, however, even if they did not commission or create work.

Nearly all NPOs/MPMs should expect to have their work assessed at some time during the year and this should be viewed as a normal part of their relationship with Arts Council England. From April 2015 the programme substantially increased the volume of assessments so that we have a better understanding of the quality of their work over time.

Artistic and quality assessments are not focused on NPOs/MPMs about which we have concerns: they are a routine element of ongoing monitoring of NPOs/MPMs.

### **Each new area of work is defined as follows:**

#### **Participatory work**

The term participatory art prompts much critical debate and can be understood in multiple ways across the arts and cultural sector. Participatory work enables audiences or participants to be part of the artistic experience or enquiry. Outcomes are frequently a balance between personal and public, artistic and social and the degree of participant involvement and ownership can vary.

As part of the Artistic and Quality Assessment programme we include participatory projects that are undertaken by NPOs including:

- Participatory work where the primary reason is to engage in the arts.
- Engagement projects that have social and/or informal learning outcomes, and may be using the arts as a tool to engage
- Outreach work undertaken by building based organisations that use participatory work as a tool for informal learning development.

The nature of work may vary across the spectrum of participatory work NPOs present. Assessors may experience the work as a participant, or observe. This will be discussed with the assessor before they attend the assessment. Assessors may also experience the work at different stages of the process; for example they may observe a project in its early stages and then return near to the end of the project, or it may be appropriate to view a final performance. Assessors are asked to comment on the quality of the facilitation, participant experience and evaluation methods used. Arts Council staff will provide assessors with relevant information about the context of the project or activity and how the work should be viewed or experienced.

## **Programmed work**

This strand covers organisations that programme work e.g. organisations such as arts centres or venues with a range of artistic and cultural activity. Whilst we already assess events programmed by NPOs – we don't currently assess an organisation's approach to programming. Our recommended process is for one assessor to attend three events programmed by an organisation across a season, and to write one assessment incorporating all three events, contextualising the events within the organisation's wider public programme.

## **Museums (MPMs) and quality assessment**

The Arts Council aims to achieve a greater integration of museums across all aspects of its work. The Accreditation scheme exists as a baseline standard for the museum sector from which museums develop. The Designation scheme identifies outstanding collections in non-national museums, libraries and archives and assesses the national significance and quality of collections, but doesn't assess the quality of the organisations' programming. The AQA programme is distinct, with its focus on assessing activity. However, we recognise that there needs to be richer, more nuanced discussions about quality, with an element of critical challenge.

Museum assessments will focus on publicly-accessible events/activity produced or commissioned by Major Partner Museums (MPMs) – they are not assessments of an organisation.

Assessors will be encouraged to attend an event related to an exhibition (long-term and short-term), and to first spend some time at the exhibition itself. Each assessment may therefore consider more than one activity, and would allow for relatively small scale events to be assessed within the context of a wider exhibition.

## **Work which is not included in the scheme**

Not all NPOs receive artistic and quality assessments. For example, they may not be appropriate for some services; umbrella including bridge or networking organisations and conferences.

Activities which take place as part of **formal education** are also not included in AQA. This is because we recognise that this scheme is not the best way to assess formal learning programmes. We recognise there is a wide spectrum of work, and by its nature participatory work may well have strong learning elements; however it's not the purpose of the AQA programme to assess formal education outcomes.

## **Informing funding decisions**

Clearly, one artistic and quality assessment in isolation can only ever be a ‘snap shot’ of a particular piece of work as assessed by one individual. It may provide the Arts Council and the funded organisation with a useful starting point for a discussion about quality, but it will never provide a full picture of the quality of an organisation and the Arts Council will not use one assessment in isolation to inform a funding decision.

Artistic and quality assessments will provide an evidence base as they build up over time. They will play a role in the next round of investment decisions, in 2017.

Of course, Arts Council staff will continue to assess the quality of funded organisations’ work and we are not asking assessors to make funding decisions for us nor to take any responsibility for our decisions, directly or indirectly. An artistic and quality assessment will be one piece of evidence of quality, alongside other kinds of evidence, which we take into account when making judgments. Although quality is a vitally important criterion for funding decisions, it is not the only criterion that we need to take into account.

### **The Assessment**

Artistic and quality assessment should contain fair, balanced and honest judgments about quality, based on sound evidence and it is important that those judgments are explained clearly. In order to encourage a degree of consistency of approach and to prompt assessors to consider different aspects of the work, the assessments are all written to a common template. The template covers a range of elements that contribute to the quality of the work as a whole.

We recognise that no assessor can be completely “objective”. In fact, it is the subjective experience, expertise and understanding of each individual assessor that makes their judgment valuable. It is important that the subjectivity of each assessor is recognised and understood.

### **The assessors**

The assessors are appointed following an open recruitment process against published criteria, including:

- Artform/discipline expertise
- ability to make fair, evidence-based judgments about quality and to explain those judgments clearly in writing
- understanding of the context within which arts and cultural organisations operate and
- an understanding of the context within which arts and cultural organisations make their work.

Assessors are not “assigned” to particular organisations. As a general rule we commission different assessors to assess an organisation’s work where possible on different occasions, to help ensure that organisations are assessed from a range of different perspectives.

### **Commissioning assessments**

Arts Council Relationship managers recommend work to be assessed. The scheme is managed centrally by the AQA team based in the Birmingham office. The AQA team informs organisations in advance when an assessor is going to see their work, letting them know which assessor will be attending. There is a short biography of each assessor on the Arts Council website:

<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/national-portfolio-organisations/artistic-and-quality-assessment>

If the organisation believes the assessor is unsuitable (for example, the organisation believes the assessor has a strong conflict of interest), they may raise this with the AQA team. It will be considered and the relationship manager and other colleagues will be consulted as appropriate, and it may be decided to send a different assessor. This happens only in exceptional circumstances, however. Assessors may often have different kinds of interest but in most circumstances this can be managed, as long as it is openly recognised and understood.

### **Completed assessments**

The AQA team send completed assessments to the organisation at the same time as they are sent to the relevant Arts Council relationship manager. The Arts Council retains copyright of the assessments and organisations may not use them for promotional or publicity purposes. If an organisation wishes to show an assessment to a third party, they need to obtain Arts Council England’s permission in advance. As a matter of courtesy, Arts Council will inform the assessor that their assessment is going to be shared with another individual or organisation.

The organisation is free to contact its relationship manager at any time, of course, to discuss the assessment. We envisage, however, that rather than discussing each assessment individually, organisations and relationship managers will choose to discuss a range of assessments annually, for example, as part of a broader conversation about quality.