**Ambition for Excellence Programme Evaluation**

**Arts Council Response**

Ambition for Excellence was a funding programme initiated in 2015, at a mid-point in Arts Council England’s strategy for 2010-2020, *Great Arts and Culture for Everyone*. Through the programme, we invested a total of £32 million in 67 projects, across England with 56 of these taking place outside of London.

The programme had several strategic aims:

* to contribute to the development of place
* to grow and develop talent and leadership outside London
* to encourage more international collaborations
* to create high quality new work for outdoor and festival contexts
* to create work at scale exemplifying the creative case for diversity

The fund opened for applications in May 2015 and final awards were made in February 2018, with projects taking place between April 2016 and March 2022. Notably, the period included the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, delaying the completion of 11 projects. Just over half of the projects (34) were delivered by combined arts organisations; 43 were led by organisations in the Arts Council’s National Portfolio and the majority of grants (36) were for over £500,000.

Some projects were affected by the impact of the pandemic, interrupting, postponing and delaying delivery, and in some cases changing the shape and scale of the project. Despite this, there were some unexpected positives for projects as a shift to online delivery fostered wider accessibility and international online connections.

In2Impact were commissioned by the Arts Council to independently review the impact of the fund against its overarching aims and identify any learnings to support future funding approaches and priorities.

The Arts Council welcomes In2Impact’s insightful evaluation report. It highlights clear success in enabling significant shifts in ambition, partnership development and creative opportunity for the majority of the projects. In particular, the evaluation indicated the fund supported 1,100 new commissions, which together created over 23,000 days of employment for artists.

Reflecting back on the fund, it’s possible to see a clear line from the aims and delivery of Ambition for Excellence to both the development of [Let’s Create](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/lets-create), the Arts Council’s strategy for 2020-2030, and the Arts Council’s new [2023-26 Investment Programme](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/2023-26-Investment-Programme).

There are two clear examples of this:

1. **Ambition for Excellence had a noticeable impact on the development of diverse talent – supporting progress towards a more diverse and representative funded sector**.

Supported projects broke new ground in the ambition and scale of disability-led work, with examples including **Shape London’s *Unlimited International***, **Cirque Bijou’s *Extraordinary Bodies***, **Mind the Gap’s *Zara***, and **Tin Art’s *The Talent Hub****.* Several projects created a step change in visibility and opportunity for Black, Asian and ethnically diverse artists, including **Junction CDC’s *Diverse Actions***, **ArtReach’s *Journeys Festival*** and **Culture Central’s *Transforming Narratives****.* Projects additionally addressed barriers to entry and progression of people from disadvantaged social backgrounds, for example **Jerwood Charitable Foundation’s *Weston Jerwood Creative Bursaries****.*

Individually each of these projects was strong; collectively they represent significant progress in practice, scale and ambition towards a more diverse sector. This has been evidenced further through the increased investment in diverse-led organisations in the 2023-26 Investment Programme, including welcoming **Unlimited** to the national portfolio, increased investment for the **Diverse City/Extraordinary Bodies partnership** and an uplift for **Tin Arts** to build on their artist development work.

1. The focus on **developing community cultural partnerships to deliver a much-improved offer for people in their localities** was a significant strand of Ambition for Excellence investment.

The **Heart of Glass** project in St Helens and the ***Future Arts Centres*** initiative led by **Stockton ARC** have both helped inform the conversation about place-making and the role that partnership projects can play in reaching underserved communities. Support for **Hull City of Culture** and the ***Suramedura project*** for **Freedom Festival** have fed into the development of a renewed and impactful offer for the city. **Folkestone Triennial** is also a lasting major event made possible by the support of Ambition for Excellence in its early stages. **Metal’s Estuary** festival is another example of a major place-based project initiated with the support of Ambition for Excellence.

The evaluation additionally provides evidence that Ambition for Excellence, through investment at scale, supported major development of outdoor arts and work for festivals. This strengthened the offer for audiences and participants and built a more resilient outdoor arts sector. From critical investment in **Corn Exchange** ***Newbury’s 101 Outdoor Arts Creation Centre,*** to investment in key outdoor art works such as **Godiva’s *The Bridge***, **Mind the Gap’s *Zara*** and **Artichoke’s *London 1666****,* the programme has invested in a broad infrastructure underpinning the conceptualisation, creation and delivery of major national outdoor projects.

As well as highlighting successes of the programme, the report also helpfully raised some learnings for the creative and cultural sector, including the Arts Council, to consider for the future:

* **Projects rooted in strong partnerships generally flourished**, whereas others reported that managing relations between project partners was challenging.

We recognise the importance of the nature and strength of partnerships in major project delivery, which is why it is a key factor in decision-making for larger-scale national Project Grant investment.

* **Consulting and engaging with communities** is key to successfully implementing projects and building their legacy.

Since the inception of Ambition for Excellence, the Arts Council has strengthened its guidance and expectations around community consultation and engagement – all our major funding recipients now need to demonstrate their plans to ensure access, excellence, inclusivity and relevance.

Our funding programme [Creative People and Places](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/creative-people-and-places-0), now in its 10th year, has particularly led the way in putting community consultation and engagement at the heart of the Arts Council’s strategy for 2020-2030, Let’s Create. In recognition of this, in 2022 we brought 39 Creative People and Places projects into our National Portfolio to continue building community voices into the development of local cultural offers.

* Projects would benefit from more **practical guidance and support, peer-led learning, examples of good practice and advice on how to build sustainable legacy**.

Following the success of the Creative People and Places peer learning programme, we increasingly look for opportunities to design peer-led learning into our funding programmes, for example the Cultural Development Fund. We’re also delivering a [place-based peer learning programme](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/your-area/place-based-peer-learning-programme) to help participants build networks, collaborate and exchange knowledge, best practice, ideas, and opportunities with others. All of this work places value on longer term collaboration with communities.

We also recognise a call from participants to develop a follow-on programme, offering a similar scale and ambition, after some projects struggled to develop a sustainable legacy without Ambition for Excellence’s significant funding.

Over several years, the Arts Council has been reducing the number of separate grant programmes it operates and, instead, uses National Lottery Project Grants (NLPG) in a more strategic and flexible way. While Ambition for Excellence no longer exists as a separate funding programme, the opportunity to secure significant grants to create a step change in ambition in artform or in place does still exist.

Many of the projects have secured additional support through NLPG, or the 2023-26 Investment Programme as outlined earlier.

Our [Nationally Significant Projects strand](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/ProjectGrants/project-grants-information-sheets?query=significant&sort_by=titles) of NLPG can offer up to and, in exceptional circumstances over, £1 million to support projects that have significant potential to develop the creative and cultural sector in England. Similarly, our [Place Partnership Programme](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/ProjectGrants/project-grants-information-sheets?query=place&sort_by=titles) within NLPG offers significant investment to project consortia aiming to make a step change in cultural provision in a defined geographic location. Both these programmes support activity of scale and ambition and are focused on supporting partnership working to deliver high impact outcomes. We are confident that many of the types of projects previously supported through Ambition for Excellence are now receiving investment through the Nationally Significant and Place Partnership strands of NLPG.

A commitment to ambition and quality remains one of the four [Investment Principles](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/lets-create/strategy-2020-2030/investment-principles) of Let’s Create, however it is no longer the sole driver. Supporting the creation of relevant and inclusive work, encouraging dynamism and innovative new ways of working and recognising the importance of delivery in an environmentally responsible manner are key principles for the Arts Council’s major investment projects.

So, while Ambition for Excellence may no longer exist as a stand-alone programme, the spirit and our commitment to it is represented in Let's Create and the opportunities it provided continue to exist in National Lottery Project Grants.