



**Arts Council England Stakeholder Research 2017-18**  
**Qualitative research with the arts and cultural sector**

**March 2018**

An evaluation report prepared by Qualia Analytics  
on behalf of Arts Council England

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# Executive summary

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This research investigates stakeholders' views about the Arts Council as part of a periodic evaluation of attitudes about the Arts Council's priorities, work, relationships, communication, investment processes and contribution to the sector. The Arts Council has used this research since 2009 as a way to engage with its stakeholders and to assess its performance and reputation among its key audiences. To continue with this on-going series of studies, in 2017 the Arts Council commissioned Qualia Analytics to conduct two strands of Stakeholder Focus Research.

This report presents findings from 27 in-depth, qualitative interviews with a diverse range of Arts Council England stakeholders. These stakeholder interviews represent "Strand 1" of the 2017-2018 Arts Council England Stakeholder Research conducted between October and November 2017. This report is divided into two main sections:

## 1. Overall perceptions of the Arts Council as an organisation:

This pertains stakeholder views of the Arts Council's role within the sector (including its performance and impact), *working relationships* and *communications*, and its *leadership in equality and diversity*.

### Perceptions of the Arts Council as an organisation

Arts Council and its Role

Working Relationships

Communications

Equality and diversity

## 2. Stakeholder views on the Arts Council's investment programmes:

This includes application and funding decision-making processes and stakeholder views on strategic priorities.

### Perception of Investment programmes

Application for investment

National Portfolio funding programme

Grants for the Arts

Local Authorities

## Section 1 - Key Findings

### 1. Overall perceptions of the Arts Council as an organisation

#### 1.1 The Arts Council and its Role

##### 'Strengths' for the Arts Council

The overarching 'strengths' of the the Arts Council most commonly voiced by stakeholders pertain the following:

- The Arts Council's **Sector focus** is recognised in its commitment to the arts and culture sector, and role in providing linkages between arts and culture stakeholders. This encompasses a broad **Scope**, including provides funding, advocacy and sector development.
- The Arts Council is seen to have broad **Geographic** reach, which includes nation-wide and regional presence across England.
- The Arts Council's role is frequently described as **Supportive** as open and accessible, recognising good work, communicating well, and being a critical friend and advocate.
- Stakeholders regard **People** at the Arts Council as a key strength. Staff are identified as quality, knowledgeable and hard working. In particular, stakeholders express positive views towards the Arts Council's relationship managers and senior leadership.
- The Arts Council is known primarily among stakeholders as a funder for the sector. As a **Funder**, stakeholders recognise the Arts Council's response to the public funding crisis and note NPO and core funding in particular, along with the value and size of funding. The Arts Council's role is seen to encourage **Risks** within the sector. It is regarded as ambitious, challenging and thorough.
- As an **Advocate**, the Arts Council is seen as an interface between government and arts, independent from the government, and as having 'political clout'. Connected to this, stakeholders emphasise that the Arts Council offers a voice for the arts and cultural sector.
- Stakeholders see the Arts Council's role as providing clear **Leadership** for the sector, which is mostly well-regarded. This also connects to a strength as a facilitator of long-term **Strategies**.

[The Arts Council] give support and they fund: They're interested in artists and organisations doing well. And they're interested in the development of artists and organisations. That's their strength– New NPO

## **‘Weaknesses’ for the Arts Council**

The most commonly expressed ‘weaknesses’ that stakeholders associate with the Arts Council relate to:

- Stakeholders indicate that the application and monitoring processes can be complex and bureaucratic. Stakeholders attribute size and scale of operations, extensive procedures and paperwork with bureaucracy. Albeit, there is recognition that such bureaucracy may be unavoidable due to the nature of the Arts Council’s role in ensuring accountability for the investment of public funds. Connects to views of the Arts Council can sometimes be unresponsive and ‘slow moving’.
- This is consistent with previous iterations of this Stakeholder Focus Research. Evidence in the present study provides similar sentiments, where stakeholders continue to indicate funding and reporting requirements are challenging for smaller organisations and individual artists to address without feeling it as a burden. This appears connected to perceptions of bureaucracy and concerns that Arts Council is ‘not listening’ and is disconnected from the practical issues artists and arts organisations are facing (also see Section 1.2 Working relationships).
- Arts Council’s emphasis on quantitative metrics and targets in funding applications, monitoring and reporting requirements have lead to ‘tensions’ between the Arts Council and the sector. With this in mind, stakeholders express concern about the Arts Council’s promotion of ‘Quality Metrics’ for the arts and culture sector, which are seen as both problematic and an imposition. For stakeholders, there is a perception that these metrics are poorly aligned as a measurement approach because of the experiential realities of most art forms. Furthermore, some stakeholders seen this as evidence that the Arts Council does not intend to listen to the sector. This is further evidence of bureaucracy and unresponsiveness and appears counter key strengths previously indicated, that the Arts Council’s is supportive. Further requirements for ‘metrics’ may be difficult to without clear expert guidance.
- Based on the type of guidance and support stakeholders see from the Arts Council, there are some perceived gaps in the Arts Council’s appreciation for the practical, day-to-day issues that small arts and culture organisations and individual artists face.
- There is concern for terminology used in funding application guidelines and the amount of paperwork needed in the application process. Stakeholders highlight the need to lessen the prevalence of Arts Council-specific terminology in application guidelines and reporting requirements in order to make the application process more inclusive.
- There is concern that the Arts Council’s focus is still London-centric, despite efforts to widen investment distribution through England.

*Their focus on quantitative, I think that is a weakness. I think they can be very defensive, and tend not to listen to the sector as much as they possibly should. And this can often create tensions between the industry and the Arts Council – SSO*



## 1.2 Working relationships

### Relationships with the Arts Council

- Stakeholders' consistently positive perception of relationship managers. There is strong evidence that relationship managers significantly improve stakeholders' perception of their relationship with the Arts Council as an organisation. Stakeholders describe them as approachable, knowledgeable and supportive.
- Findings about the value and importance of relationship managers are consistent with previous waves of the Stakeholder Focus Research, which also reported that relationship managers are 'described as professional, responsive, and helpful. Many stakeholders report that they are able to get in touch with their relationship manager for advice or support' (ICM, 2014, p. 34).
- There is an evident concern from stakeholders about how 'influential' relationship managers are because of a sense of 'blockage' with 'regional decision making'.

*There has been an increased distancing between the decision-making aspect of the Arts Council and the practice on the ground - NPO Unsuccessful*

### Relationships beyond relationship managers

- In contrast to, there is often a mixed view of their relationships with Arts Council and its decisions. There is a perceived gap between 'practice on the ground' and Arts Council's decision making.
- In this regard, beyond relationship managers, stakeholders attribute this 'distancing' to the extent of engagement appears related to being 'on the ground' with stakeholders and the type of engagement stakeholders have with the Arts Council: stakeholders want to be seen more as partners.
- There is a history that stakeholders are aware of that suggests being close to the Arts Council (geographically or relationally) is advantageous. Whereas, such concerns are mostly raised by stakeholders without clear connections within the Arts Council beyond their relationship managers

## 1.3 Communications

### Communication channels

- Considering the different channels used by the Arts Council to communicate with stakeholders, preferences are indicated for face-to-face interactions with Arts Council representatives and other stakeholders.

### Providing the right level of information

- Stakeholders indicate they are overall satisfied with the level of information they receive from the Arts Council through personal contact, email, telephone and newsletters.
- Stakeholders indicate strongly that they benefit from in-person meetings and that this can often outweigh the costs of travel.

- Stakeholders note interest in further strategic initiatives and provisions for advocacy of a wider range of art forms.

### Communication about investment outcomes

- Once decisions are made, stakeholders make a point that the Arts Council communicates openly through a range of channels, which are appreciated as 'open' and 'transparent'. This indicates an overall importance for proactive publications.
- Stakeholders are generally clear on where and how Arts Council funding is invested, but indicate that the process for how decisions are made – and who makes the decisions – is not as clear.

### Influence beyond direct stakeholders

- Stakeholders indicate that engaging wider audiences to understand the value of arts and culture is crucial in the current financial and political context.
- Stakeholder question whether the rationale for investments are sufficiently clear to the general public.
- Perspective are indicated that while more could be done by the Arts Council in its advocacy role, the sector could support the Arts Council's further by extend communicating its value for the arts and culture sector.

## 1.4 Equality, diversity & Creative Case

- The research shows appreciation for the leadership role the Arts Council is taking on equality and diversity.
- Stakeholders indicate that the Arts Council's efforts build on existing awareness of equality and diversity challenges and the interest in making improvements.
- A major area for improvement identified by stakeholders was in clarifying what 'success' looks like in equality and diversity. There is a need to clarify how to address the Creative Case for Diversity in specific, practical terms.
- There are concerns about the subjectivity of the assessment of diversity by Arts Council staff. Stakeholders identify a need for further support on how the Arts Council expects them to measure achievements and make progress towards addressing the full range of Arts Council requirements and strategic priorities.

*The Arts Council is much more comfortable in engaging with diversity around ethnic backgrounds, or around things that can be quantified. I think there is in the UK, inevitably, a discussion around diversity of [social] class that is much more difficult to see – NPO Libraries*

## Section 2 - Key Findings

### 2.1 Applications for investment

#### Clarity of Investment Guidelines

- Overall, the research shows that the guidelines for applying for the different investment programmes are viewed as clear, extensive and ultimately helpful, even if they sometimes seem ‘complex’ or ‘overwhelming’ at first.
- However, there was concern that the complexity of guidelines and application requirements is sometimes disproportionate to the level of public investment on offer. This is perceived as a barrier for small, grassroots organisations and new applicants, as well as individual practitioners, who lack specialist fundraising support. Finding the right balance between different levels of arts organisations and investment is clearly a challenge that the Arts Council will have to revisit on a regular basis. The previous iteration of the Stakeholder Focus Research also raised this issue: ‘For smaller organisations, a lack of capacity and resources often present great difficulty throughout the application process, and many struggle with the level of bureaucracy that the application requires’ (ICM, 2014, p. 78).
- Stakeholders note that Arts Council expectations are continuously rising. Although some stakeholders express concern about the strain that the Arts Council’s application requirements place on their organisation, they understand the need for robust mechanisms to assess organisations and individuals.
- Stakeholders indicate that improvements can be achieved by simplifying the terminology used in funding guidelines, as well as defining key concepts in practical terms. This is particularly important for individuals and organisations that have less experience with Arts Council investment. Specifically, using non-specialist, common language to describe expectations rather than Arts Council-specific terminology is seen as a valuable area for improvement to benefit such ‘early stage’ applicants.
- Stakeholders would like detailed practical examples from the Arts Council to provide a tangible model for how they could satisfy key requirements. One stakeholder also recommends introducing a two-stage application process to reduce the overall paperwork burden on the sector. This stakeholder suggests that filtering applicant organisations at a first stage could be a way of improving the efficiency of the application process for all parties.
- Finally, stakeholders consider direct communication channels, including access to relationship managers, to be the most effective and dynamic way of getting their questions answered. This suggests that maintaining easily accessible pathways for applicants to gain support from Arts Council staff is essential.

*In terms of understanding what the Arts Council wants to fund through its different funding streams, I think that is very clear now and there’s really good guidance from the website – New NPO*

## Grantium application platform

- Overall, stakeholders indicate to understand that Grantium is a platform aimed at enhancing application processes by being more agile and less bureaucratic than previous approaches. However, some stakeholders feel the portal is at times unreliable and that it makes the application process overly complex.
- The portal's perceived shortcomings have adversely affected some respondents' opinion of, and trust in, the Grantium-based application process. Indeed, there is evidence that difficulties using the application platform may be reinforcing the notion that applying for Arts Council funding is a complex undertaking. As such, it is important that the Grantium-enabled process becomes simpler and more intuitive.

*[...] So, if you look at the help and guidance for using Grantium, how many pages is it, 90 or something? You know, it shouldn't take 90 pages to explain how to use an online funding portal [...] [Grantium] is an ongoing source of frustration and perhaps a barrier to encouraging more people to apply, [a barrier to] a wider and more diverse group of people applying for funding – New NPO*

## Decision-making processes

- Stakeholders feel that the clarity of decision-making criteria in Arts Council investment programmes is a key strength. However, when the outcomes of the decision-making process are viewed less favourably, this is linked to concern about whether equal treatment is given to all organisations applying for investment.
- Stakeholders emphasise the value of publishing information about how specific investments are decided. For example, specific scores and reviewer comments could be published alongside the information about who is funded.
- Enhancing such disclosure practices could increase the perception of the Arts Council as a transparent funder, which is even-handed in its investment decisions.

*The actual decision-making process isn't transparent, is it? Otherwise, you'd have people, you know, a random set of people sitting in the room when [Arts Council] people were making those decisions, or some other [transparency] mechanism. You don't. It's all a very much an internal mechanism, and that's not transparent at all. And you can't appeal it, you can't appeal the decision. You could appeal the process, but you can't appeal the decision – NPO Renewed*

## 2.2 National Portfolio

- The perception of changes to the National Portfolio investment programme is generally positive. The results highlight enhanced diversity in the National Portfolio as a perceived strength of the most recent round of investment. This improvement is in part attributed to the introduction of banding, that is, a newly introduced differentiated model for allocation of funding to National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs).

- In addition, the shift from a 3-year to 4-year funding cycle was universally praised by stakeholders, with indications that this may be prompting longer term planning in organisations. Moreover, the additional year of funding clarity may be opening up new possibilities for long-term projects. This new timeframe also allows stakeholders to have deeper and more meaningful engagement with the Arts Council's priorities.
- NPO-based respondents also indicate a positive perception of the active communication between them and the Arts Council as a factor in their positive appraisal of the investment programme and its administration by the Arts Council.

### **2.3 Grants for the Arts**

- Grants for the Arts (GFTA) is widely recognised as the best available funding pathway for small organisations and individual artists. However, stakeholders express concern that the application process may be too demanding for 'entry level' applicants lacking familiarity with Arts Council terminology or sufficient resources to address extensive requirements.
- Given the importance of making 'entry-level' arts funding accessible, one stakeholder recommended introducing a scheme that would be even more focused on entry-level applicants at the earliest stages of development.

### **2.4 Local Authorities**

- There is clear evidence that the Arts Council's role in working with local authorities is appreciated.
- GFTA is viewed as the most suitable investment programme for local authorities and community groups. It is seen as requiring less resources to develop applications and therefore is viewed as more accessible for local organisations, especially in small and rural areas.
- Local authorities sometimes have access to other sources of investment to support their arts and culture ambitions, not only the Arts Council. Therefore, what the Arts Council is most uniquely positioned to offer them is know-how to guide them in successfully developing and delivering art and culture projects.



## INTRODUCTION

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As a public body, the Arts Council must be in touch with its external stakeholders and maintain effective relationships with the individuals and organisations it works with. The Arts Council has used this research since 2009 as a way to engage with its stakeholders and to assess its performance and reputation among its key audiences. To continue with this on-going series of studies, in 2017 the Arts Council commissioned Qualia Analytics to conduct two strands of Stakeholder Focus Research. This report presents findings from in-depth, qualitative interviews with a wide range of stakeholders for Arts Council England. These stakeholder interviews represent “**Strand 1**” of the 2017-2018 Arts Council England Stakeholder Research.

This research is comprised of qualitative interviews aimed at producing meaningful insights about the reputation of Arts Council England, and its effectiveness and performance as viewed by its stakeholders in a range of arts and cultural organisations throughout England. Among other key issues, the interviews gathered information about stakeholders’ experiences with the application process for the recent round of National Portfolio investment, as well as decision-making and announcement processes associated with this and other investment programmes. This research aims to inform the Arts Council’s on-going process of improving and refining the ways it goes about achieving its strategic goals by collecting feedback and suggestions from key stakeholders in a range of areas crucial to the Arts Council’s work.

This report is divided into two sections:

**1. Section 1 explores the overall perceptions of the Arts Council as an organisation:**

This includes stakeholders' perceptions of the Arts Council and its role, their views on the Arts Council's **performance and impact**, and their opinions on their **working relationships** and **communications** with the Arts Council.

**2. Section 2 looks at how stakeholders perceive the Arts Council's investment programmes and funding decisions:**

The section explores their views on the **application process**, their opinions on the **NPO and GFTA funding programmes**, and how these programmes have an **impact on the Arts Council's equality and diversity priorities**.



## BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

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The Arts Council England operates in a challenging policy and practice context, constantly balancing the needs of disparate stakeholders. As a public body, the Arts Council must be in touch with its external stakeholders and maintain effective relationships with all of the individuals and organisations it works with. As part of its strategic research programme, Stakeholder Focus Research has been commissioned by the Arts Council since 2009. The stakeholder focus research helps the Arts Council to keep its finger on the pulse of its most important interlocutors.

This research delivers evidence about the Arts Council's progress, helping it to stay relevant and attentive to the shifting landscape in which it works. In previous reports, the stakeholder focus research revealed concerns about how the Arts Council would manage its shifting responsibilities. These reports also highlighted key opportunities for the Arts Council to make a difference, given its central role as a bridging organisation between government and the arts and culture sector. The previous research emphasised the need for more communication between the Arts Council and regional stakeholders. There were also concerns about the Arts Council making meaningful changes based on ongoing input from its stakeholders.

Given the scale of the challenge the Arts Council faces today, it is essential to understand how these issues have progressed. Therefore, this research addresses a need to account for current sector circumstances in addition to analysing trends. This present research has aimed to keep balance in delivery of a research design that meets needs for the Arts Councils and presents a straightforward account of stakeholder views within the arts and culture sector.



The present report addresses two parts of this overall scope of stakeholder focus research, including:

- **Strand 1:** In-depth telephone interviews with key opinion formers in the arts and culture sector.
- **Strand 2:** A large-scale online survey of the arts and cultural sector.

This report delivers **Strand 1** by providing an in-depth qualitative report based on analysis of stakeholder interviews. The outcomes of this qualitative strand of the Stakeholder Focus Research provide the Arts Council and its stakeholders with insights about:

- **Reputational Drivers for the Arts Council.** How stakeholders perceive the Arts Council's performance and impact, and how stakeholders view the Arts Council's vision and role, underpinned by its 10-year strategy "Great art and culture for everyone";
- **Working relationships.** How stakeholders view their working relationships between stakeholders and the Arts Council;
- **Communications.** What stakeholders perspectives are on messaging, communication channels, meetings, contact with relationship managers and transparency of decision-making;
- **Investment and Funding Processes.** How stakeholders view changes to the NPO investment programme, application processes and funding decision-making, as well as related issues for other funding programmes;
- **Equality, Diversity and the Creative Case.** How stakeholders view the Creative Case for Diversity and wider equality and diversity agenda, and perceptions of the relationship between the Arts Council's strategy on equality and diversity and investment decisions.



## METHODS

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### Introduction

The present study is based on 27 semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interviews conducted with Arts Council England stakeholders between October and November 2017. These interviews aimed to gather detailed insight into the reasons behind stakeholders' views and perceptions of the Arts Council's reputation and performance, changes in the National Portfolio investment programme and other funding processes and strategic priorities.

The research focused on gaining full value from conducting qualitative interviews by asking questions that go beyond the surface level responses. As a research practice, the objective is to start with participants' overall, 'top of the mind' views and concerns, then uncover drivers for these views by developing two types of depth through the data collection and analysis:

- 1. DIGGING DEEPER:** Dig deeper when the participant gives an informative response, but underlying concerns or motivations need clarification.
- 2. DIGGING WIDER:** Dig wider to gain a greater understanding of the participant's context, which may underpin surface-level responses.

The results are presented using the quality assurance mechanism known in qualitative research methodology as ‘thick description’ (Jensen & Laurie, 2016). Thick description involves the provision of detailed descriptions and quotations that are sufficiently elaborated to allow the reader to draw their own conclusions about what the participant has said.

Qualitative research does *not* intend to provide statistics on what stakeholders think, but rather to represent the range of views and then explain how these views relate to their experiences. It is illustrative rather than statistically reliable. In this sense, qualitative research does intend to shed light on why people have particular views and of the participants concerned. This approach enabled respondents to participate in an informal and interactive one-to-one discussion and allow time for the complex issues to be addressed in some detail. It also enables researchers to query about the background behind people’s opinions. It is important to bear in mind that qualitative research aims to facilitate deeper insights while accounting for an individual’s perceptions of facts, lived experiences and social influences (e.g., from the views of others).

## Research sample

An initial contact list of 78 stakeholders was compiled by the Arts Council. This list included contact details, institutional affiliation, region and art form. Stakeholders were contacted directly through a warm up e-mail sent by the Arts Council and through an invitation to participate sent by Qualia Analytics. Interviews were scheduled with stakeholders who self-registered and indicated their willingness to participate.

The final research sample is made up of 27 Arts Council stakeholders.

### Sample (n = 27)

Type	Number of Interviews
NPO (New)	7
NPO (Renewed)	6
NPO (Unsuccessful applicant)	3
NPO (Past)	1
NPO Museum (New)	2
NPO Museum (Renewed)	1
NPO Libraries	2
Local Authorities	1
Non-Portfolio - GFTA	1
Non-Portfolio – Opinion Former	1
SSOs	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>27</b>

## Data collection

### Interviews guides for qualitative research

Starting from the past interview guides for the telephone depth interviews, our team undertakes the process of topic guide development in close consultation with the ACE project team. The interview guide for the depth interview:

- overview of the Arts Council
- the Arts Council's role and impact
- working relationships
- values and behaviours
- communications
- perceptions of future priorities.

Semi-structured interview guides were designed in consultation with the Arts Council. Seven interview guides with some overlapping questions were created to ensure relevance to the different types of stakeholders, including National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs), Museums, Libraries, Local Authorities, Grants for the Arts (GFTA) recipients, Opinion Formers and Strategic Support Organisations (SSOs).

The interview guides were organised around the following sections:

- Section 1: Introduction and background
- Section 2: What's your view of Arts Council England?
- Section 3: Working relationships
- Section 4: Funding processes
- Section 5: Performance and impact

Each of these sections had main questions and extra guidance for interviewers to probe for detail. This enabled digging deeper and wider to understand participants' underlying concerns and motivations, as well as the role of their contexts.

### Facilitation of qualitative research

Drawing on contact details supplied by Arts Council England of stakeholders and senior opinion formers, Qualia Analytics recruited for interview participation and conducted 27 semi-structured depth interviews by telephone. This included chief executives and chairs of major arts organisations and senior figures in local and national government and the voluntary sector. Interviews were conducted between 1st of October and 25th November 2017 and each lasted around 40–60 minutes.

The Arts Council sent a warm-up email before Qualia Analytics sent the participants the survey invitation. There were up to two email reminders. Our researchers conduct telephone interviews, recording and transcription of the interviews in line with best practice in social research methods. In addition, after being informed about the ethical- and data protection policies governing this research, including confidentiality and the anonymisation of data, all of the 27 individuals provided verbal consent to the interviewers, agreeing to participate in the interview and for it to be recorded. All interviews were conducted remotely by telephone or video teleconference.

## Data analysis

We conduct a full analysis and reporting of the qualitative research, following established quality assurance procedures. All the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed and analysed using a hybrid of inductive and deductive methods. The inductive dimension of the analysis was carried out by categorising data extracts using the computer-aided qualitative data analysis software Dedoose. Once the initial patterns were identified, they were connected to the aims of the Stakeholder Focus Research.

Results presented here are a synthesis of these two data analysis orientations, designed to balance the need to follow data where they lead (inductive) with the requirement to address specific issues within this research (deductive). This process and the use of the data analysis software were part of the quality assurance process for this research, designed to establish an audit trail tracing the lines between analytic interpretations and the original content as it appeared within the raw data.

**Analysis and reporting.** Data extracts included in this report are verbatim comments from stakeholder's who participated in interviews. These extracts should be interpreted as views of participants relevant to a particular issue or topic, rather than as defining the views of all participants or views of those outside of the present sample.

# Results



# RESULTS

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## 1. Perceptions of the Arts Council as an Organisation

This chapter reflects stakeholders' perceptions about Arts Council England as an organisation. Firstly, section 1.1 analyses the Arts Council and its role, including overall perceptions, performance and impact, and stakeholder suggestions for improvement. Second, section 1.2 considers views about working relationships between the Arts Council and its stakeholders. Third, section 1.3 explores stakeholder experiences of the Arts Council's communications. Finally, section 1.4 evaluates stakeholders' perceptions of the Arts Council's efforts regarding Equality and Diversity, including the Creative Case for Diversity.



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## 1.1. The Arts Council and its role

### 1.1.1. Overall perceptions

Stakeholders express a range of views based on experiences with the Arts Council. The word cloud below illustrates stakeholders' responses when answering the question 'when you think of the Arts Council, what three words or phrases come to mind?'



Figure 2. 'Top of mind' overall perceptions of the Arts Council

This word cloud shows 'top of mind' perspectives from Arts Council stakeholders.

The Arts Council's financial support is seen as crucial for enabling arts organisations to develop their creative potential:

*[The Arts Council] is essential, because public funding is essential. An essential part of the English way of funding music, art, theatre, is allowing the organisations to be creative, not commercially-minded in the sense that we don't want to go bankrupt but allowing us to take risks – Renewed NPO*

The data extract above highlights the value stakeholders placed on the Arts Council's role as a funder. The research also shows an overall perception that the Arts Council maintains a high level of requirements for organisations seeking investment. Stakeholders explain that administrative procedures and paperwork required during the application process for funding and reporting.

Importantly, stakeholders commonly note 'bureaucracy' as a way to describe the Arts Council as an organisation. This understanding of bureaucracy within the Arts Council apparently connects to decision-making processes and the governmental affiliation.

*Bureaucracy, because there is always a considerable amount of bureaucracy associated with receiving funding – New NPO*

Also, stakeholders consider that the Arts Council's support should have on account the realities of the participant organisations and the arts and cultural sector, rather than only public policy:



*Well, I mean, they are bureaucratic [...]. I don't want this to sound unkind, but they are bureaucrats. And most of the people working in the Arts Council, not all but most, haven't run anything. And they're policymakers, they're bureaucrats [...]. It's not across the board, I don't mean that totally, but I think that it would be better if they had a few more people working for them who understood what it was like to run an organisation, rather than just about policy, public policy – NPO Museum Renewed*

Stakeholders' tendency to associate the Arts Council with bureaucracy was a consistent theme throughout the present research. This is a longstanding view amongst stakeholders, as can be seen in this quotation from the 2014 qualitative interview report from the Stakeholder Focus Research: 'As in previous years, a number of stakeholders think of the Arts Council as a bureaucratic organisation' (ICM, 2014, p. 13).

### 1.1.2. Performance and impacts

This sub-section explores stakeholders' views about the Arts Council's performance and effectiveness in its key roles: as a funder, development agency and advocate for the arts. It also analyses how stakeholders view the Arts Council's strategy and goals.

Stakeholders are generally positive about the overall performance of the Arts Council and its impact on their organisations. However, this element of the report goes into detail about both perceived strengths and weaknesses of the Arts Council. These assessments reflect the values and attitudes that stakeholders associate with the Arts Council.

#### Strengths

The 'strengths' help highlight stakeholders' perception of Arts Council England in its various roles. During interviews, stakeholders were asked to provide three words that are indicative of the Arts Council's strengths (see Figure 3, below):

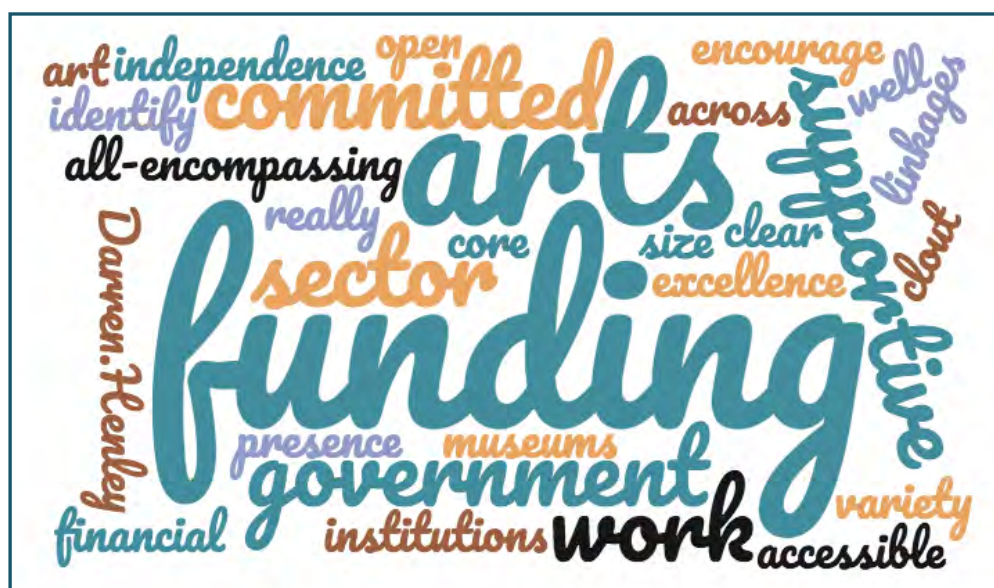


Figure 3. 'Top of mind' strengths of the Arts Council

These impressions include the following dimensions of the Art Council's core roles and responsibility:

- **Sector focus**
- **Supportive**
- **Geographic**
- **Broad scope**
- **Risk and strategy**
- **Leadership**
- **Funder**
- **Political advocate**

See below for further explanation of these categories and the full range of responses:

- The Arts Council's role entails a **Sector focus**, which stakeholders recognise in its commitment to the arts and culture sector through providing linkages between stakeholders, and that Arts Council's role further connects to stated objectives and strategic aims for developing the sector.
- As a **Funder**, stakeholders recognise the Arts Council's response to the public funding crisis, NPO and core funding, as well as the value and size of funding.
- As an **Advocate**, the Arts Council is seen as an interface between government and arts, independent from the government, and as having 'political clout'. This further connects the Arts Council being a voice for the arts and culture sector.
- The Arts Council is seen to have broad **Geographic** reach, which includes nation-wide and regional presence across England.
- **People** in the Arts Council are identified as 'good' quality, knowledgeable and hard working. This also includes appreciation for recognising good work, communicating well, and being a critical friend.
- **Leadership** is seen as clear, and senior leadership is well-regarded.
- The Arts Council's role is seen to encourage **Risks** within the sector. It is also seen as ambitious, challenging and thorough. This further connects to the Arts Council's orientation long-term **Strategies** for the sector.
- The Arts Council is recognised for its **Supportive** role. This includes a number of descriptors, including being open and accessible, and being a critical friend and advocate.

The following data extracts are selected to help represent evidence for these overall categories and how strengths are perceived by sector stakeholders. For example, stakeholders recognise that the Arts Council provides support to the arts and culture sector in a number of ways:

*They [the Arts Council] give support and they fund: They're interested in artists and organisations doing well. And they're interested in the development of artists and organisations. That's their strength– New NPO*

The data extract indicates a positive view of the Arts Council from its roles as a supporter and funder for the sector. Further, this perspective pertains the Arts Council's desire to see artists and organisations develop and 'do well'.

Many stakeholders understand this support in terms of the Arts Council's investment in the sector. In this sense, funding it provides to develop the projects of artist and arts and culture organisations is also seen as one of the Arts Council's strengths:

*They are one of two principal sources of funding, the other one being the Heritage Lottery Fund, which tends to be more capital [project]-based [funding]. ACE's strength is that it is really good at funding programmes and activities. So that's a good thing, that's a strength. I think they are prepared to take risks, which is a strength [and] encouraging people to go beyond their normal thinking – New NPO Museum*

As this data extract highlights, stakeholders see and appreciate the Arts Council's role as a principal *investor* in the arts and culture sector. In this context, one reason the Arts Council is positively regarded is its willingness to take risks and encourage artists and organisations to 'go beyond their normal thinking'. The strength identified here is the Arts Council's performance in funding programmes and activities.

This connects to the Arts Council's 10-year strategic framework of "Great Art and Culture for Everyone", which aims support for non-traditional art forms and the inclusion of wider audiences. In this regard, the Arts Council's commitment to its strategy is visible by its willingness to invest in non-traditional programmes.

Also, stakeholders recognise that the Arts Council demonstrates its commitment to the sector through the efforts it makes to support ambitious ideas within an adverse financial context:

*They are very open to hearing ambitious ideas. And they strive to support those ideas where possible. They are working within an area with shrinking resources, and we all are aware of that in the industry. But they are determined to do as much as they can with the limited resources they got, and they don't want to limit the ambition of the people who they're supporting. I think that links to the good people that they work with and their commitment to strive and to find ways through. And even if that is not financial [support,] they would look to relationship brokering and collaboration that might work to make ambitions happen – SSO*

This data extract portrays a view of the Arts Council as 'determined', responsible with limited resources, and open to hearing and supporting ambitious ideas. Further to this, stakeholders positively regard Arts Council staff as 'good people' committed to collaboration and finding ways to overcome challenges with artists and organisations.

Stakeholders appreciate the Arts Council's role as a facilitator of positive changes in the arts and culture sector:

*I'm a great believer in 'success breeds success' and there has been a bit of a culture, in the culture and arts sector, of almost 'too big to fail'. There have been some very notable examples of where Arts Council has proved that's not true [that large organisations will be funded regardless of the quality of their work]. So what they are doing is, they are using their strengths and their money in particular, to garner real change rather than tokenism of change – New NPO Museum*

This data extract indicates the Arts Council's strength as a funder and investor connects to its perfunctory efforts to develop the sector. In this regard, the Arts Council's impact in the sector is visible for stakeholders in the way it leverages changes within the sector through its funding decisions.

Indeed, stakeholders see the Arts Council's effectiveness as an advocate for the sector is related to the capabilities of its staff.

*The quality of people and the individuals I deal with [at the Arts Council is a strength]. The [Arts Council's] ability to speak for the sector, the power of its voice, which it doesn't actually use as much as it should, but the way it does is powerful, and a strength. And, its ability to bring the cultural institutions together. Again, it doesn't do as much as it should, but it's actually a big strength – Opinion Former*

The data extract above is an example of stakeholders' assessment of the capacity of the Arts Council's staff to act as advocates and coordinators, who can provide linkages between stakeholders and positively impact the sector. Albeit, there is recognition that the Arts Council, through its staff<sup>1</sup>, has capacity to expand these roles further.

The strengths identified in this research show that the Arts Council's role is valued for the work it does with arts organisations. Stakeholders positively regard the Arts Council's role and efforts in providing investments and funding support to develop the sector, particularly during a challenging period of time, such as its response to the public funding crisis.

## Weaknesses

The research identifies areas in which the Arts Council can improve its practice to enhance its impact and ease some of its stakeholders' burdens. During interviews, stakeholders were asked to provide three words that are indicative of the Arts Council's 'weaknesses' (see Figure 3, below):



Figure 3. Perceived weaknesses of the Arts Council

<sup>1</sup> The present research makes it clear that relationship managers are a key strength to the Arts Council's relationship with stakeholders. **Section 1.3** develops this analysis further.

The most common 'weaknesses' that stakeholders express about the Arts Council are mostly attributed as longstanding issues, which are indicated by stakeholders in this round of research and are consistent with previous iterations of this Stakeholder Focus Research. See below for further explanation of the board categories and the full range of responses:

- **Bureaucratic:** Connects to views of the Arts Council as being 'unresponsive' and 'slow moving'. Stakeholders attribute this to size and scale of operations, extensive procedures and paperwork. Albeit, there is recognition that such bureaucracy may be unavoidable due to the nature of the Arts Council's role in ensuring accountability for the investment of public funds.
- **Unresponsive:** This is evident at different levels, but primarily involves the view that the Arts Council is 'not listening' and is disconnected from the practical issues artists and arts organisations are facing.
- **Too much emphasis on metrics:** This issue pertains the Arts Council's emphasis on quantitative metrics and targets in funding applications, monitoring and reporting requirements. Stakeholders identify this emphasis on metrics is perceived as both problematic and an imposition, which is leading to 'tensions' between the Arts Council and the sector: This has become further evidence of *bureaucracy and unresponsiveness*.
- **Inaccessible language:** Regards the language used for funding application guidelines and the bureaucracy embedded in the application processes;
- **Geographic inequality:** There is concern that the Arts Council's focus is still London-centric, despite efforts to widen investment distribution through England.

The following data extracts are selected to help represent evidence for these overall categories and how 'weaknesses' are perceived by sector stakeholders.

### **Bureaucracy and unresponsiveness**

There is evidence that the Arts Council may be seen by stakeholders as not being fully listened to or understood:

*I believe they do not know their client base well enough. Their relationship managers have a strong relationship with their clients, but above that level I think it morphed into too many things to do, and too much bureaucracy, and too much form-filling – NPO Renewed*

As this data extract indicates, these issues are associated by stakeholders with 'bureaucracy' and limitations that may negatively effect the Arts Council's role and impact in the sector. This appears to counter the Arts Council's efforts to manage perceptions among stakeholders and diminishes previously indicated key strengths of being 'supportive' and 'understanding'.

While many concerns are attributed to the Arts Council as an entity, stakeholders recognise the value and commitment of the Arts Council's staff:

*There's a lot of really passionate committed and talented individuals within a structure [at the Arts Council] that sometimes may be not supportive of their ability [...] because of the sheer size and scale of it [the Arts Council] – New NPO*

This data extract points to recognition that Arts Council staff are 'passionate', 'committed' and 'talented'. However, stakeholders identify that institutional circumstances and 'size and scale' of the Arts Council may constrain the extent of support that staff can provide to the sector.

In this regard, stakeholders indicate that the Arts Council may sometimes lack responsiveness to the sector because of problems inherent to the Arts Council:

*It's like moving an oil tanker. It's not as responsive as I'm sure they would like to be, because of the systems and procedures they have to go through, and the sheer scale of the operation. I think that there can be, sort of a deep professionalisation, in terms of being part of the bureaucracy in that system for a very long time – New NPO*

The data extract above is an example of sentiment from stakeholders about the Arts Council as unresponsive. This extends to stakeholders' view of problems that may be protracted and therefore seen as inherent to the Arts Council, such as its 'scale', 'systems and procedures' and 'deep professionalisation'.

### **Too much emphasis on metrics**

The Arts Council's relatively recent emphasis on quantitative measurement of 'quality' was a related source of concern for stakeholders, who indicate that the focus on quantitative metrics has 'created tensions' between the sector and the Arts Council:

*Their focus on quantitative, I think that is a weakness. I think they can be very defensive, and tend not to listen to the sector as much as they possibly should. And this can often create tensions between the industry and the Arts Council – SSO*

As the data extract illustrates, stakeholders indicate a negative appraisal of the approach that the Arts Council has adopted for quantitative measurement of quality. Stakeholders express concern that this 'quantitative' approach is a 'weakness' and it may indicate inadequate listening to the sector or understanding of artistic work.

Stakeholders directly point to initiatives for developing and implementing "metrics" into the sector while questioning the Arts Council's approach:

*They are process-driven because they talked about having less bureaucracy within their next phase of NPO funding. And, certainly I can't see that it's any less bureaucratic, and I would think is probably more so. So, any organisation which comes up every now and then with a new big idea whether that's about protective characteristics or quality metrics, or environmental [sic] is constantly dancing to a... to be a government tune – NPO Renewed*

The data extract above provides context about such initiatives that are salient to stakeholders. Some stakeholders reference terms such 'measurement', 'quantitative' approaches and 'targets', rather than specifically named initiatives, such as "Quality Metrics" (Section 2.1 explores these views further).

Indeed, this concern about the Arts Council's promotion of 'Quality Metrics' for the arts and culture sector regards a perception that these metrics are poorly aligned as a measurement approach because of the experiential realities of most art forms. Furthermore, the approach used by the Arts Council – and the perceived imposition of problematic metrics – can be seen by some stakeholders as evidence that the Arts Council does not listen to the sector. As these data extracts indicate, there is a risk that the Arts Council is being perceived by stakeholders as developing its initiatives without listening to concerns from the sector.

### **Inaccessible language**

Stakeholders are hoping to see improvement in the Arts Council's provision for individual artists and small organisations, who are widely seen as the ones that have the largest 'struggle' in navigating the arts funding system:

*There's quite a big community of local artists and they struggle much more to get support [...]. So, I wondered whether the Arts Council could support individual artists better and you find that they already said that they intend to try to do so more in the future – New NPO*

This pertains a frequently referenced 'weakness', which is the Arts Council's use of terminology that individual artists or smaller organisations may have difficulty understanding:

*I think [the Arts Council] can be perceived as not that accessible [...] I mean that's more from an individual artist's point of view, the language [the Arts Council uses is difficult] – New NPO, Library*

The terminology used by the Arts Council in the online portal and application forms can be viewed as intimidating for individual artists and smaller organisations with less experience navigating Arts Council vocabulary and processes (see Section 2.1 for more information).

### **Geographic inequality**

Another of the weaknesses some stakeholders identify relate to the allocation of funds in London and regional areas:

*Historically, it [the Arts Council] is still viewed as London-centric and Southeast-centric and [it has] a long way to go to genuinely give audiences and organisations across the country an equal stake – NPO Libraries*

This stakeholder expresses the perception some stakeholders have about the geographical distribution of funds being unequal. This stakeholder notes this perceived weakness is 'historical', and indeed, as will be discussed in the sub-section on geographical location in Section 2, some stakeholders feel this historical issue is significantly improving now.

## Clarity of strategy, objectives and goals

Stakeholders understand of the Arts Council's 10-year strategy and specific goals for achieving 'great art and culture for everyone'. This objective is to be addressed through the Strategic Framework 2010-2020 (updated 2013):

<b>Goal 1:</b>	Excellence	Excellence is thriving and celebrated in the arts, museums and libraries;
<b>Goal 2:</b>	For everyone	Everyone has the opportunity to experience and to be inspired by the arts, museums and libraries;
<b>Goal 3:</b>	Resilience and stability	The arts, museums and libraries are resilient and environmentally sustainable;
<b>Goal 4:</b>	Diversity and skills	The leadership and workforce in the arts, museums and libraries are diverse and appropriately skilled;
<b>Goal 5:</b>	Children and young people	Every child and young person has the opportunity to experience the richness of the arts, museums and libraries.



Figure 5. Goals within Arts Council 10-Year strategic framework (Source: Arts Council England, 2013)

Overall, stakeholders both remember and can discuss the 10-year strategic, which indicates it is well-communicated through the sector. Stakeholders suggest the strategic framework is useful for understanding the Arts Council's perspective and aims:

*It was useful to have a clear sense from the Arts Council of what they were aiming at. It helps to understand their perspective – NPO Renewed*

In this sense, stakeholders consistently see the aims as being clear:

*I think [the Arts Council's] aims are clear. I absolutely, 100% support them, and I think they've gone about it in a very determined way – Opinion Former*

As indicated in this data extract, stakeholders express confidence in the way the Arts Council has developed these strategies and goals.



However, stakeholders also express concern for that the strategy and goals are quite 'subjective', and therefore difficult for arts organisations to provide evidence of achieving them:

*I think some of it is very subjective, like the "Great art for everyone" and "Excellence in the arts". Defining excellence is very subjective and that is a hard one to show if you're achieving your goals or not – NPO Past*

As this data extract shows, while stakeholders indicate clarity about what the Arts Council aims to achieve with these overall goals, at a practical level for arts organisations the implications may not be as clear. This leaves stakeholders uncertain for how to reach these goals:

*We see their overall ambitions, but we are not quite sure what is the objective to get there from the Arts Council's point of view – New SSO*

Albeit, some stakeholders suggest that such ambiguity is unavoidable due to fundamental characteristics of the arts as difficult to define and agree on:

*That has, perhaps, to do with the nature of the arts, nobody agrees on what art is or should you fund it or not, or what its impact is on people. Those are the endless debates in the arts – NPO New*

In this sense, there is an indication that stakeholders also have difficulty defining impact, which can be similarly challenging to agree about. This connects to a key concern within the sector of how to measure 'artistic quality' and 'impact'.

## **Practical implementation of strategic vision: metrics**

Stakeholders suggest that the Arts Council's efforts to establish common indicators to assess the artistic excellence and quality of artistic activities are not fully accepted:

*I still think there's too much of a focus on numbers and reporting. I find that hard as an artistic organisation, trying to prove that it was 'excellent' through numbers, whether that was audience numbers, or funding, or ticket sale numbers. So, constantly attaching of these numbers to the art activities [is a problem] – NPO Past*

As evident in this data extract, there is an overall view that the Arts Council may be too overly focused on numeric measures to assess artistic qualities such as 'excellence'. Furthermore, stakeholders express their concern that 'numbers' are most important to the Arts Council despite inherently difficulty in determining such 'subjective' notions:

*The evidence that seems to be most important to the Arts Council are numbers. Numbers that relate to visitors, but also numbers that relate to postcodes or relate to demographics. The ability to produce quantitative data and then also this kind of notion of excellence, how do you go about determining that? – NPO New*

As this data extract indicates, while there is emphasis on visitor numbers, postcodes and demographics, stakeholders view that artistic measures may lack comparisons. This extends for stakeholders about such quality metrics as 'the next thing' the Arts Council wants to use for talking about artistic quality; this is seen as controversial within the sector:

*If you take quality metrics... I don't know if you know about quality metrics, but it's the next thing that they're going to talk about on art. And there's a lot of controversy, within the industry anyway, as to how it is that you do this. How do you say what is really good art? And obviously the audience says that, the critics say that, and all the rest of it. But, it's very difficult to quantify and everyone's always trying to pin something down. Which actually, if they just listen to something or look at it, you know... that's what we're here for – NPO Renewed*

This type of feedback indicates that there is a need for better rationale for requiring the various types of quantitative measures and quality metrics, which may require more in-depth engagement with the sector about measuring art.

### 1.1.3. Stakeholder suggestion for improvement

Stakeholders indicate a longstanding need for artform strategies to be better integrated with the overall strategy:

*For many years now, they have avoided specific artform strategies. That means that as organisations we are a little bit in the dark – New SSO*

This data extract indicates a perception that the Arts Council may be avoiding artform-specific strategies. Indeed, there is clear interest in developing artform-specific strategies to adapt the Arts Council's overall strategies:

*There are loads of other underlying strategies. We have a Creative Case for Diversity [...], but that should be written into each art form strategy, other than a standalone strategy. And I think [the Arts Council] feels like it's being diverted by their environmental impact strategy and their Creative Case for Diversity. And actually, these are things that should be embedded within each and every art form strategy – New SSO*

As the above extract shows, a suggested improvement in terms of the clarity of the strategy and how progress could be measured would be to have strategies tailored to each of the range of art forms that the Arts Council supports. In addition, incorporating the different art forms within the implementation of programmes such as the Creative Case for Diversity could make it easier for individuals in the sector to see applicability of the general strategy.

## 1.2. Working Relationships

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This section is focused on the working relationships and communication between the Arts Council and its stakeholders. It describes stakeholders' views on the overall effectiveness and quality of working relationships, as well as on channels, reach and effectiveness of Arts Council communications.

Contact between the Arts Council and National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs) is maintained by relationship managers. Relationship managers are based in regional offices and are the first point of contact for such stakeholders. Other stakeholders, such as Grants for the Arts (GFTA) recipients, do not technically have a relationship manager, but still use that term to talk about their personal contact within the Arts Council.

### 1.2.1. Relationship with the Arts Council

There is an overall positive view from stakeholders about their working relationships with the Arts Council's relationship managers. For example, stakeholders highlight the value of relationship managers who engage more extensively with stakeholders by helping organise regional events or attending board meetings:

*The individual who oversees us comes to our board meetings and they're always an important presence – Opinion Former*

As this data extract shows, personal relationships with stakeholders are improved through face-to-face communication and the extent of engagement this represents.

Indeed, stakeholders consistently express that their engagement with relationship managers are particularly valued:

*One of the things that I most value is the relationship with my relationship manager. The relationship manager, I've had a few different ones, always tend to be really knowledgeable, really supportive, just incredibly helpful. I have never had a negative relationship with a relationship manager, so that's a real strength – NPO Unsuccessful*

As indicated in this data extract, relationship managers are seen to be knowledgeable, helpful, and supportive. This is particularly appreciated when stakeholders see that relationship managers are knowledgeable about their artform and how their organisation works:

*Our relationship manager is very supportive and very knowledgeable about our work. Not just about our art form, but about the way that we work. He is very good at maintaining contact – SSO*

This data extract also indicates that stakeholders value when relationship managers maintain contact, which extends to the degree of responsiveness that stakeholders experience.

Further, stakeholders view the advice they receive positively because the support they receive feels ‘constructive’:

*I like the system of having a relationship manager who is very responsive when I've got a question about anything. I think the advice and support that we've had from our relationship manager has helped us enormously. Contact with the relationship manager has been very constructive as well because I get pretty good advice about funding applications – NPO New*

This data extract further shows that personalised feedback is important for providing stakeholders with constructive support.

Then, stakeholders also view relationship managers as a bridge to those ‘inside’ the Arts Council:

*Our relationship manager has been supportive in terms of trying to lobby for us inside the Arts Council, and I think that that's much appreciated because we are a relatively junior client, and we now have a pretty experienced relationship manager, which is an improvement – NPO Renewed*

As indicated in this data extract, stakeholders appreciate the support they receive from ‘experienced relationship managers’, especially as a ‘junior client’. This extends to the view that relationship managers are advocates on stakeholders’ behalf with the Arts Council:

*[...] What does work well is how effective [our relationship manager] can be communicating onwards to the Arts Council. I am not sure how seriously that feedback around concerns of the [particular art form] sector is taken at the next level of the [Arts Council] hierarchy. But I am confident that [our relationship manager] advocates on behalf of the sector. I really feel that she understands our art form. But in a way, I feel like there is a blockage. And so, when it comes to strategic priorities for the region for example, I am not sure how seriously [the particular art form] is taken. I don't know how influential [relationship managers] are when it comes to the regional decision making – Non Portfolio, GFTA*

As this data extract shows, stakeholders appreciate the advocacy of their relationship managers especially regarding art forms. However, there is an evident concern from stakeholders about how ‘influential’ relationship managers are because of a sense of ‘blockage’ with ‘regional decision making’.

Furthermore, stakeholders have the sense that relationship managers are ‘over-stretched’:

*They are probably over-stretched. I think that the relationship managers probably have a great deal to do on their plates. So, I think it is difficult – NPO Renewed*

As can be seen in the data extracts above, stakeholders notice that relationship managers are likely to ‘have a great deal to do on their plates’.

While relationship managers may provide support to many stakeholders, as far as relationship managers are over-stretch, have limited influence with regional decision makers, or otherwise have a hindered ability to engage, stakeholders may initiate relationships that extend beyond their relationship managers to fill communication gaps with the Arts Council.

### 1.2.2. Relationships beyond relationship managers

There is strong evidence that relationship managers improve stakeholders' perception of their relationship with the Arts Council. In contrast to stakeholders' consistently positive perception of relationship managers, there is often a mixed view of their relationships with the Arts Council and its senior leadership.

For some stakeholders, there is a view that the relationship with the Arts Council is 'distancing':

*There has been an increased distancing between the decision-making aspect of the Arts Council and the practice on the ground - NPO Unsuccessful*

The data extract above highlights a perceived gap between 'practice on the ground' and Arts Council's decision making. Beyond their relationship managers, stakeholders attribute this 'distancing' to the Arts Council's engagement with the sector:

*Relationship managers have a strong relationship with their clients, but above that level, I think it's quite difficult for the Arts Council to get out and understand its client base. I don't think, at the moment, the Arts Council is working as a partner with us. I think it is very much a funder, and I think it would be better if it could see us as partners – NPO Renewed*

As indicated in this data extract, both the extent and type of engagement with sector stakeholders are perceived as important. In this regard, extent of engagement appears related to being 'on the ground' with stakeholders and the type of engagement how stakeholders are treated by the Arts Council; stakeholders want to be seen more as partners.

Whereas, stakeholders indicate a perception that having connections with 'those who are closest to the Arts Council' enhances favourability and an 'ability to bend the rules':

*It's not just one, certainly every couple of years, there is a story that seems to say that those who are closest to the Arts Council, who are based in London, and are prominent within the sector, are able to bend the rules or the rules don't apply to them in the same way, as they do for small organisations – New NPO*

As this data extract shows, there is a history that stakeholders are aware of that suggests being close to the Arts Council (geographically or relationally) is advantageous. Whereas, such concerns are mostly raised by stakeholders without clear connections within the Arts Council beyond their relationship managers.

For some stakeholders, wider engagement with senior staff in the Arts Council may be seen to constitute 'luck':

*I'm lucky enough to have relationships right across the Arts Council, from their Chairman, their Chief Executive, their Regional Directors and our own Relationship Managers. And I think if you try and do have those relationships, right across the organisation, then that's always good, and going to be much more fruitful – NPO Museum Renewed*

This data extracts confirms that it may indeed be 'fruitful' for stakeholders to have relationships extend beyond their relationship managers to people in the Arts Council's senior leadership. As this opinion former suggests, Arts Council senior leadership could do more provide general communication to the sector:

*As in the Chairman level or CEO level, they don't do much general communication to the member organisations. I think they could do so much more – Opinion Former*

## 1.3. Communications

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Communication between stakeholders and the Arts Council goes through a variety of channels. Communication from the Arts Council via newsletters and the web portal Grantium tend to receive a mixed appraisal: some stakeholders are satisfied with the amount and content of this communication and some stakeholders wish to be better informed.

### 1.3.1. Communication channels

The majority of stakeholders have frequent contact with their relationship manager, via email, phone or during face-to-face meetings. The positive working relationship stakeholders have with their relationship managers is largely connected to direct, personal communication:

*The e-mail is what is personal contact [for me]. Because I e-mail directly the person I need to speak to, and they get back to me. The reason why it works is because it's personal contact – New NPO*

Stakeholders indicate that email is an effective communication channel for maintaining personal contact and getting quick, helpful responses. However, being able to call on the telephone is highly appreciated by stakeholders:

*E-mail works, although, sometimes a phone call is the best. There are certain situations where a phone call is better – NPO Past*

In some situations, picking up the phone and discussing issues directly is more convenient. Many stakeholders mentioned to be able to call their relationship manager any time is valuable, even if scheduling can sometimes be challenging:

*Just trying to get through to someone on the phone can be tricky. Also, these people are not in the office a lot, they've got to move around a lot – NPO Past*

In addition, stakeholders consider the helpline for the web portal Grantium to be responsive and very helpful:

*Regarding Grantium, I would advise anybody to ring the help line. Because they are much better at getting something sorted – New NPO*

Besides being able to get someone on the phone or be in contact via email, face-to-face communication remains a highly valued part of the relationship.

### Newsletter as communication channel

Besides personal contact, the Arts Council newsletter is often viewed as a valuable source of information. As the data extract below highlights, it is viewed as adequate for meeting most stakeholders' needs.

*I think the newsletter is probably just enough. It is a bit of information either useful and interesting to me or it's not. But that's ok, because it's clear. And I can read sections that are relevant – SSO*

The newsletter helps stakeholders to stay up to date on news about the Arts Council and the arts and culture sector. Stakeholders are pleased to have an overview of activities, events, and reports, instead of having to read this information through different information documents.

Other stakeholders disagree about the value of the newsletter, indicating that the volume of electronically delivered information is excessive:

*I like informal communication. I don't want to be bombarded with kind of pretty pink flyers through the email – NPO Museum New*

As the data extract above shows, not everyone is interested in receiving the newsletter. Along these lines, a stakeholder raised concerns about the number of newsletters received:

*Corporately, we get quite a lot of newsletters through, which is ok, [but] maybe there are a few too many – NPO Renewed*

While some people are not keen to receive newsletters, or think there are too many, in general this communication channel is well regarded, and is praised by stakeholders for helping to keep them up to date.

## Grantium as communication channel

Finally, receiving information through the web portal Grantium can have great potential, as the information is centralised, and stakeholders can log on and have information relevant to their application.

However, as the following data extract shows, how and when to use the portal needs clarification for some of the stakeholders:

*When we got our NPO, we didn't realise [we had been successful] because you're meant to log on. We didn't know to log on. I was waiting on a letter coming through the door – New NPO*

As sub-section 2.1.2 explores further, improvements to the Grantium interface are needed to ensure it is an effective communication channel, rather than being overlooked. Stakeholders highlight that logging into the system to acquire information is inconvenient. The data extract below shows a desire of getting information through the mail, instead of via Grantium:

*I think, suggesting to people that they have to look on their software system for Grantium in order to find letters that give you direct information about things is extraordinary, as opposed to just sending an email. They stopped sending direct emails, they stopped sending you a notification of "you need to fill in this by Wednesday and this by Thursday:" You have to keep looking on their Grantium website – NPO Renewed*



Indeed, direct and personal contact is valued by the Arts Council's stakeholders, while Grantium is seen as an inefficient channel for communication:

*You have to keep logging into the system to find out whether you've got it [funding]. That is a mistake. It does remove some of that relationship. It feels very cold and very distant – SSO*

The perceived 'distance' of this communication method is an important aspect to take into account as the Arts Council develops Grantium's role as a communication tool. The human dimension of the relationship remains vital to stakeholders.

### 1.3.2. Providing the right level of information

Generally, stakeholders are satisfied with the level of information they are receiving. This positive assessment that they are mostly being kept well-informed is heavily underpinned by the ongoing personal contact component between stakeholders and relationship managers. As section 1.3.1 describes, stakeholders usually prefer regular communication with relationship managers. However, some stakeholders mention not learning about funding opportunities in a sufficiently timely manner:

*I think some of the other strands of funding that one could possibly apply to sometimes come out quite late. We haven't been given a heads-up – NPO Renewed*

As the above data extract shows, it is important for stakeholders to get information about funding opportunities in time to start the application process promptly.

Another stakeholder expressed a need for updates pertaining to particular art forms.

*I'd like some information on what strategy is for them nationally as well as regionally. I would like to know what the Arts Council are doing for our art form, whether or not they include us. I don't want to feel like I have to advocate for my art form – Opinion Former*

### 1.3.3. Communication of investment outcomes

Stakeholders indicate that criteria of assessment and communication about investment decisions are generally clear and transparent.

*On the whole, it's clear and transparent. Particularly with the new portfolio, it's clear why people have been funded, but probably some in the portfolio can't really see why they're there. I don't think the process is explicitly clear; criteria of assessment are clear, but who makes final decisions is not clear... but maybe no one needs to know? – New SSO*

While stakeholders are generally clear on where and how Arts Council funding is invested, this stakeholder indicates that the process for how decisions are made – and who makes the decisions – is not as clear. This will be discussed further in **Section 2.1 Application for investment** around the level of communication about the decision-making process and perceptions of why certain funding decisions are made.

However, once decisions are made, stakeholders make a point that the Arts Council communicates openly through a range of channels, including online and directly to NPOs:

*Also at the different levels, whether it's on emails or publications online, about why they're giving out that funding and how much they're funding through that stream, it's quite open and transparent now – New NPO*

As this data extract shows, this communication of this manner is perceived as 'open' and 'transparent', which stakeholders clearly appreciate. This indicates an overall importance for proactive publications to sector stakeholders.

### 1.3.4. Influence beyond direct stakeholders

Overall, stakeholders indicate that effectively communicating the value of arts and culture to a wider audience beyond direct stakeholders is an important part of the Arts Council's advocacy role.

In an austerity context, communicating the value of arts and culture beyond the sector is important for building necessary support for the sector to secure its future against possible government spending cuts.

*Especially since our central government is starting to cut arts and culture, the Arts Council needs to have a strong voice in terms of advocacy – Non Portfolio, GFTA*

As this data extract indicates, the Arts Council's voice as an advocate for the sector is crucially important.

Indeed, stakeholders appreciate the Arts Council is 'working hard' in this role to make a broad impact:

*It's working very hard to make us all think about the greater population to ensure that we involve everybody in great art. I think they're laudable for the efforts that they are making – NPO Renewed*

Stakeholders recognise that the Art Council's efforts has an effect on perceptions and ideas for engaging the public with 'great art'. Additionally, stakeholders recognise the amount of work that's been done by the Arts Council:

*I think that [advocating for the arts] is an essential role and I think there's a huge amount already done but I think there could be absolutely more. And I think that the sector could be mobilised to support the Arts Council to do that a little bit more as well – New NPO*

This data extract provides an alternative perspective from this stakeholder that while more could be done by the Arts Council, the sector could further its support for the Arts Council's advocacy to extend communication of this value for the arts and culture sector. In particular, it is possible that rationale for investments may not be sufficiently clear to the wider public:

*People [in the public] know that the Arts Council supports a lot of different work and they can see that in a museum, in a theatre, and they can see*

*that all over. But in terms of why they're supporting it, other than "this person's making something artistic," I don't know if that message comes across – NPO Past*

As this data extract conveys, there may be further need to communicate with the public about the value of arts and culture, especially in context with financial and political pressures. As well, the Arts Council's may extend its advocacy beyond immediate stakeholders by connecting to other governmental bodies:

*In our world, [the Arts Council] doesn't have any influence on Department of Education's wider concerns – we do this on their behalf. They need to have a dialogue with Department of Education – New SSO*

Indeed, this extract indicates that the Arts Council's interface with Departments can further its role as an advocate.

## 1.4. Equality, Diversity & Creative Case

The Arts Council is committed to promoting and embedding equality and diversity within the arts and culture. For example, 'equality and diversity' is one criterion affecting the National Portfolio and Arts Council England's investment decisions. In this regard, investments into the National Portfolio are intended to *'create the conditions in which there is a diversity of leaders, producers and creators of art and audiences, reflecting the diversity of contemporary England'* (2014, pg. 49). The Arts Council defines diversity in this context as follows<sup>2</sup>:

**By diversity we mean the multitude of ethnicities, faiths and socioeconomic classes that make up modern England. Our concept of diversity includes disabled people, older people and people of all sexual orientations. The geography of diversity spans England's regions, from the most rural to the inner city.**

First, this section explores the stakeholders' views of the Arts Council England's role as a leader in the debate on equality and diversity in the arts and culture. Second, it engages with stakeholders' understanding of the Creative Case for Diversity and the Arts Council's wider diversity agenda. Third, it examines how stakeholders understand diversity in the workforce and audiences.

### 1.4.1. Leading the debate on Diversity and Equality

This research investigates the views about the Arts Council's leadership in setting the equality and diversity agenda within the arts and culture sector. Results indicate that the Arts Council's commitment to diversity is visible in the organisations and projects being funded and supported:

*They're trying to be more diverse in their funding and they're trying to represent more of our community – New NPO*

Furthermore, results indicated that stakeholders understand the general need for the Arts Council to ask arts organisations about their diversity levels and practices:

*I think you have to hold yourself in check. I think people might think they've got diversity embedded in their organisation, but they might not [really have achieved this]. So, I think there is a point in there where you've got to be held accountable, and these questions [about workforce and audience diversity] have to be asked no matter how certain they might seem – Past NPO*

However, there was some evidence that pointed out concerns about the Arts Council's diversity priorities, which could be an imposition on the creative process in some ways:

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/national-portfolio-2018-22-faqs#how-diverse-is-the-portfolio>

*But, I think there's a difference in having [diversity] embedded in the organisation and how you operate thinking: "Oh, well, if we make this artistic decision we will then reach this many people", and that's wrong – Past NPO*

Nevertheless, stakeholders suggest that the Arts Council is in a position to offer meaningful leadership on equality and diversity issues:

*They are working very hard to develop a broad understanding of what equality and diversity should be across the sector. I think that [the Arts Council] is way ahead of many other organisations in the UK. [...] Like many other things that the Arts Council does, it does it with all the best intentions. It's working very hard to make us all think about the greater population to ensure that we involve everybody in great art. I think they're laudable for the efforts that they are making – NPO Renewed*

This data extract offers a favourable view of the Arts Council's efforts to raise standards for the sector to develop its capacity to address long-term needs such as extending diversity.

Furthermore, stakeholders indicate that the Arts Council's efforts can build on the existing awareness of equality and diversity challenges and the interest in making improvements:

*I think it is building on a tradition of all of us wanting to do that [enhance diversity]. To be honest, I think it is pushing at an open door. I sense that [the Arts Council] is beginning to understand that it is a much more complex issue than perhaps might have been thought – New NPO Museum*

This data extract shows stakeholders welcome the Arts Council's leadership on this matter. In this regard, the Arts Council's efforts are also seen to increase the prominence of equality and diversity issues for sector stakeholders.

For example, the following data extract acknowledges an impact on the awareness around these issues:

*In my discussions with various chairs of the different arts organisations, everyone's got a level of consciousness and concern about it, you know, in a deeper way than they have before [...]. I actually think it will make a difference [...]. Everyone's taking it really seriously and everyone's trying to do the right thing. And it's higher up on people's agendas than it was before – Non-Portfolio*

This indicates that the Arts Council equality and diversity agenda is facilitating change within the arts and culture sector. However, from the perspective of investment decisions, stakeholders understand that meaningful changes can take time:

*When you've got a major funder saying that it's a very big prerequisite of funding, then it's obviously, you know, it has a powerful impact. We're trying to address something that will probably take years and years and years to address. But, you know, the [Arts Council is] a powerful and strong voice in promoting equality and diversity – NPO Museum Renewed*

This data extract highlights the degree of influence stakeholders perceive from the Arts Council on longstanding issues relating to equality and diversity. Stakeholders also highlight the complexity and systemic challenges involved in addressing equality and diversity:

*You've got to see why the people, why are the audiences in the concerts white? Why are the kids in the music colleges either Chinese, or from rich, wealthy backgrounds? – NPO New*

To conclude, stakeholders tend to express support for the Arts Council's role as a 'strong voice' on diversity-related issues.

## 1.4.2. Creative Case for Diversity

This sub-section addresses stakeholders' perceptions about the Creative Case for Diversity (see [www.creativecase.org.uk](http://www.creativecase.org.uk)) and its implementation by the Arts Council England. The Creative Case encourages funded organisations to make, present and distribute their work in a way that is reflective of contemporary society. Because the Creative Case covers multiple aspects of diversity in the arts and culture sector, some stakeholders indicated that a shared understanding across the sector needs to be further developed to help focus efforts:

*Some people are perceiving the Creative Case to be about artists, some people are perceiving it being about audiences, some about both of those things. So, I think that needs a little bit of tweaking, a better way to communicate about that – New NPO*

As this data extract indicates, people responsible for implementing the Creative Case within their organisations are still coming to grips with the range of issues it encompasses.

Indeed, stakeholders indicated a need for further detailed explanations and examples that show what the Arts Council wants to achieve with the Creative Case:

*All of us would have welcomed a clear definition from the Arts Council as to what they mean by the "Creative Case for Diversity." We are marked against the Creative Case all the time, and we've all found it really difficult to know what they mean by it – NPO Renewed*

In this regard, stakeholders express a sincere interest in having practical examples of what 'success' looks like from the Arts Council's perspective:

*There are people out there who probably have really great successes. I'm not sure I'm hearing about that. What I would like to know is where real difference is made, what does success really look like, and define success – New NPO Museum*

Although stakeholders are seeking a clearer explanation of the Creative Case and especially how it should be implemented in practice, stakeholders also note the systemic challenges involved in this topic:

*I think that we need to confront some of the institutional and structural inequality that exists within our [social] systems. I think this is a very- it's*

*quite a difficult place, I think, for people to situate themselves into, but I think it's a necessary one – New NPO*

As this data extract indicates, many aspects of diversity stem from factors outside of the arts and culture organisations' purview. This can make arts and culture organisations feel uncertain about how best to address equality and diversity and are, therefore, in need of well-defined methods for tackling the complexities of equality and diversity.

In addition, stakeholders indicate that targets from the Arts Council may be evaluated differently depending on which member of the Arts Council staff makes the assessment:

*I think this is another area where the Arts Council's officers can be very, very subjective. We, for example, have no issues at all with diversity and we have a rating of "good". But I'm sitting on the board of another arts organisation, which has huge issues with diversity and they also have a rating of "good". And I just can't understand how that can possibly both be the case, except that there are two different officers involved in assessing that – NPO Renewed*

Therefore, criteria regarding the assessment of equality and diversity need to be better explained by the Arts Council, so stakeholders understand how their performance is being reviewed. In addition, the data suggest that stakeholders need greater clarification on the details of the Creative Case, how the Creative Case applies to their organisations on a practical level, and how the Creative Case distinguishes from the Arts Council's wider diversity agenda.

### 1.4.3. Wider equality and diversity agenda

In addition to the Creative Case for diversity, the Arts Council has wider equality and diversity goals related to diversity in the workforce and audiences. Throughout the interviews, stakeholders did not explicitly address the difference between the Creative Case and the wider equality and diversity goals. However, their responses about diversifying their workforce and audiences show an engagement with the wider agenda.

#### **Workforce diversity**

As mentioned in section 1, Goal 4 of the Arts Council's 10-year strategic framework "Great Art and Culture for Everyone" (p. 39) is "*The leadership and workforce in the arts, museums and libraries are diverse and appropriately skilled*". The Arts Council's strategic framework includes the aim of ensuring a diverse and appropriately skilled leadership and workforce in the arts, museums and libraries. In sum, the goal is for the Arts Council to make a difference in workforce diversity.

The awareness that equality and diversity is a wider structural issue that needs the involvement of the Arts Council and the arts and culture organisations, is central to the stakeholders' reflections on how they are trying to attain the goal of creating a positive transformation of the sector's workforce.

Stakeholders who are concerned about achieving their diversity goals share the following view:

*I really struggle with how we are going to achieve some of the targets set around equality. An example, the structure of our board. All the board members are there because they have particular skills or talents or experience in particular areas of the arts or particular areas of management [...]. In terms of diversity, they are not a diverse group at all, and we have this target of getting more diversity within our board by 2021 and we're thinking: But how? – New NPO*

This data extract shows that stakeholders recognise that this issue needs to be addressed within their organisations but are unclear on how to do this.

Some of the stakeholders state that barriers to access education and training have a negative effect on the diversity of employees in specific positions:

*It's unfair if people haven't had the opportunity to be trained up in a way that's going to allow them to lead an organisation and be an Executive Director simply because of what they look like or where they come from – Past NPO*

There are many challenges involved in achieving the positive outcomes that the Arts Council envisions for workforce diversity. Indeed, stakeholders report that challenges start with the applicant pool:

*I recognise diversity in the wide workforce as a real issue. I look out of my office window and it's a pretty monoculture. And, really, I'm actively trying to do something about that, but it's really hard and people with diverse specificities just do not apply for the jobs – New NPO Museum*

The data extracts in this section show some of the challenges that organisations funded by the Arts Council are facing with diversifying their workforce due to structural barriers that they consider to be out of their reach.

Similarly, this concern can also be seen in the data extract below about the limitations on the arts organisations' ability to affect the workforce diversity at the organisational level:

*They [the Arts Council] end up adopting the form of a regulatory body trying to ensure that your practices are in keeping with your diversity policy. It's hard because even if you are, it may not always look that way when it comes down to the numbers. You hold an audition and your priority is to ensure diversity and everyone is treated equally in the audition. But you can't control who shows up to the audition. And you know numbers may reflect something that doesn't look like it's very successful. I just think it's a very complex issue [...] Because we have some control over who we choose, but we don't have any control over who's had the training and the opportunities to actually get themselves into that studio. If that makes sense. So it's a pool of people to choose from [...] [which is] limited – Past NPO*

This stakeholder expresses the view that it is unfair to hold the organisation accountable for diversity outcomes that cannot be influenced by the respective organisation.



## **Audience access**

The Arts Council's priorities and goals for arts organisations is to share their work with a wide and diverse public audience. This is communicated by the Arts Council through its 10-year strategic framework ("*Great Art and Culture for Everyone*") in Goal 2:

*"Everyone has the opportunity to experience and to be inspired by the arts, museums and libraries"* (p. 39).

Broadly speaking, stakeholders appear supportive and committed to this goal. As this stakeholder indicates, there is an understanding that 'different audiences' and 'various demographics' need to be approached:

*You have to show that you're reaching different audiences and you're trying to approach various demographics – Past NPO*

This data extra helps indicate that the goal for reaching different audiences is understood within the sector.

One stakeholder's organisation reflects complexity of a broader sociocultural context on audience composition:

*Audiences are totally white in these places. I think, that's what's happening, then you look at the [art form], and you look at the people in the [artistic activity], they're totally white or, you know, not from a diverse background. Then you look at the kids, they are coming mainly from private schools, because sometimes [art form] education is really expensive. Then, you look at the [art form] teachers in the colleges and, again, they're all... they're not from a diverse background. Then, you look at the investment in the schools and you see it's really, really, really bad, at the moment – New NPO*

This data extract indicates structural cause for why there is continuity in imbalance of ethnic diversity. This stakeholder shows a frustration with the broader context. Despite a desire to engage with diverse audiences, stakeholders express further frustration with the difficulties of achieving this goal for their institutions:

*There is a whole bloody audience out there that is just not coming to my museum, 'cause they don't think its relevant. There's a big ethnically diverse audience now out there, and we're working hard on it and we're working with other organisations, but I don't know how to crack it. I think it's right that the Arts Council does [emphasise diversity] but I think it needs to be in a more supportive and understanding way, rather than a big stick because we're not diverse. [This is because] it's kind of difficult to achieve – New NPO Museum*

While this data extract conveys that this stakeholder understands the Arts Council's emphasis on diversity, there is an acknowledgement that making a difference is a challenge that goes far beyond the efforts of any single organisation. In this way, stakeholders may lack insight for how to achieve the Arts Council's diversity goals. Thus, further guidance, support and more understanding for the broader context, appears to stakeholders as better aligned than repercussions ('a big stick') for failing to achieve diversity goals.

Furthermore, stakeholders point to 'diverse audiences' as difficult concept for the sector when moving beyond an audience's visible characteristics:

*The Arts Council is much more comfortable in engaging with diversity around ethnic backgrounds, or around things that can be quantified. I think there is in the UK, inevitably, a discussion around diversity of [social] class that is much more difficult to see – NPO Libraries*

As this data extract indicates, diversity also extends to less observable audience differences to include social class. Indeed, Arts Council's comfort engaging with ethnicity means that other types of difference that are neither easy to identify (nor quantify) must be discussed further. Thus, beyond this initiation recognition, stakeholders indicate that the need for a dialogue in the sector around class:

*I think one of the issues is not so much about the diversity, in terms of BAME [Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic] sorts of audiences, it's also a question of class. That's actually, getting people from the working class to come to the arts. It's probably, in some places, much more difficult than getting people from educated BAME backgrounds to come to arts events. And I think maybe that's something that has been overlooked, or if it hasn't been overlooked, certainly people find it quite difficult to talk about class – NPO Renewed*

This data extract shows stakeholders recognise class inequality as a significant issue that may be overlooked within the arts and cultural sector. It may be necessary for the Arts Council's leadership in helping dialogue take place on such issues

While making progress is not easy for individual arts and culture institutions to address directly, stakeholders provide evidence that substantive changes in discourse may still be taking place within the sector:

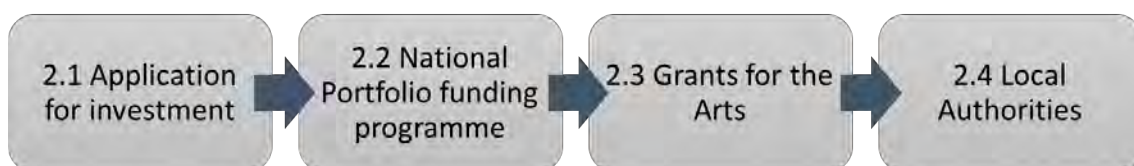
*I think there has definitely been some interesting developments. For instance, with relation to transgender, which wasn't talked about much, even compared to 5 years ago, it's increasingly seen to be there. I think there is definitely a development [improvement] in terms of the understanding of the interaction between the people identified, whether it's race, gender, sexuality and class and all the rest – Unsuccessful NPO*

This data extract indicates positive development in the awareness and understanding for the broader scope of diversity (including race, gender, sexuality and class) within the sector compared to dialogue that took place in prior years.



## 2. Perception of investment programmes and working partnerships

This chapter reflects stakeholders' views about key Arts Council England investment programmes. Firstly, section 2.1 analyses the application process for investment – by analysing views about the clarity of current guidelines, the Grantium online portal and associated decision-making processes. Second, section 2.2 considers views about the National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) Programme. Third, section 2.3 explores stakeholder experiences of the Grants for the Arts (GFTA) Programme. Fourth, section 2.4 addresses views of local authorities about the investment programmes. Finally, section 2.5 evaluates stakeholders' perceptions of the Arts Council's efforts regarding Equality and Diversity, including the Creative Case for Diversity.



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## 2.1. Application for investment

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This section explores stakeholders' views about the guidance provided to support organisations through the application process. Second, it describes stakeholders' experience of using the online portal Grantium. Third, it deals with their appraisal of the Arts Council's decision-making processes.

### 2.1.1. Clarity of guidelines

The overall view about application guidelines for different Arts Council programmes is positive. Most stakeholders indicate that the available information is both useful and clear.

*In terms of understanding what the Arts Council wants to fund through its different funding streams, I think that is very clear now and there's really good guidance from the website – New NPO*

As this stakeholder indicates, helpful information for NPO applications can be found on the Arts Council's website.

For stakeholders, clear guidance on the investment programmes is important:

*Fundamentally, the process of applying for Grants for the Arts or Strategic Funds is very logical and clear. And it is now much clearer these days, saying exactly what they want and what they're looking for – New NPO*

This data extract indicates that the Arts Council's requirements and expectations are easier to understand because of better guidance. Also, this stakeholder views guidance as 'now much clearer', indicating improvements from previous experience.

On the other hand, one stakeholder from a Strategic Support Organisation (SSO) states that the differences in funding stream criteria can lead to uncertainty for some applicants and a feeling of 'complexity':

*I think there are so many different funding streams that they run that are so different and quite complex in the face of the criteria, and so nobody has ever got a definitive answer to anything. And I think that is completely understandable when everything is that complex. It's challenging – SSO*

This data extract indicates that difficulties with clarity of guidelines may be understandable given the inherent complexity of the funding process.

However, even when guidelines are seen as 'useful' by applicants, stakeholders do indicate a sense of being 'overwhelmed' by the guidance.

*In some ways, I've been overwhelmed by the guidance. But no, I don't feel they could have done any more, really, in terms of providing guidance. I thought that was very useful, in terms of the sort of things they wanted to see in a policy document or planning document and how they wanted it formatted and so on. I thought that was very useful – New NPO*

This data extract indicates that guidelines may offer sufficient detail about what the Arts Council requires from funding applications. Even where guidelines are described as lengthy or extensive, stakeholders also view the guidelines as a helpful resource to clarify the application process.

Overall, stakeholders view guidelines as being extensive, but also helpful for clarifying the application process. The evident trend from stakeholder interviews is that the amount of information applicants need to review can make the process feel 'complex' or 'complicated'. This is explored further in the next sub-section.

### 2.1.2. Complexity in the application process

It is evident from interview results that the steps of preparing applications can make the process experienced by stakeholders as 'complex' or 'complicated':

*Complex, if you looked at the amount of information that we're having to provide, it is complicated – NPO Museum Renewed*

This view from stakeholders extends to an assessment of the resources required to undertake the application process. For example, smaller organisations can experience the application process as burdensome for their internal resources:

*It is a small organisation, the [organisation] has 1,5 permanent staff, so a major application or a process can take three months, and at least a month of that is virtually full-time working on the application – Unsuccessful NPO*

Indeed, this stakeholder indicates that the scope of work necessary to complete an application can be challenging for smaller arts organisations. The time and labour required of applicant organisations for the overall application process are evident in the following stakeholder views about the Arts Council's requirements for NPO business planning:

*Ah, yeah. There's lots and lots of different bits of guidelines for NPO business planning and I'm finding that, I'm cross-referencing tons of different documents which is sort of... that's not our business plan, it's the business plan Arts Council would want to see. Because inevitably, even if we wrote our business plans, we know what we're doing, but it does need to have all kinds of different stuff in it for Arts Council, which is understandable as a main funder – New NPO*

This data extract indicates concern about the administrative burden NPO applicants may experience when drafting a business plan to meet Arts Council requirements. There is concern that the work to draft a business plan may benefit the funder more than actually being useful for their organisation. Albeit, this concern is balanced by an understanding the Arts Council's accountability as a funder. The challenges indicated by this stakeholders' organisation concern paperwork being generated to satisfy funding requirements rather than for the genuine benefit to the organisation itself.

Indeed, other stakeholders suggest that accommodating Arts Council business plan requirements can also extend an NPO beyond their current plans:

*The Arts Council, quite naturally, when it comes to asking for our business plans, wants us to do more and more, and be more creative; to do more and more specific things – NPO Renewed*

This data extract helps show how applicants can view requirements, such as those pertaining to NPO business plans, as a burden.

As is indicated by this stakeholder, the need to use the 'right' language in applications can affect less experienced applicants:

*I've got an arts background so I totally understand and get the language that they use when they're explaining what they want from programmes, [that is] what they're going to fund. So, when they talk about excellence and engaging people and all the different kind of keywords they use, I kind of understand and know what they want here. I know to use the right language to get funded [...] But I think some artists really struggle with that, probably more individual artists than organisations. [...] [The Arts Council has] all these other criteria around excellence, so some groups, small art groups or individual artists applying for money, they don't know the right language to use, because there's always this 'high-quality' element which I can see it's important but I think [the Arts Council is] still missing a grassroots approach – NPO Libraries*

This data extract highlights that the application guidelines provide clarity in most cases about the application process and Arts Council expectations, making full use of the guidelines may require familiarity with the specific terminology preferred by the Arts Council.

In this way, stakeholders recognise that some 'complexity' in NPO funding applications may be necessary because of the Arts Council's role and need to be accountable for investing public funds properly:

*Complex but, doable, if you follow me. They can't make it much easier because it's government money, public funding. [I] quite understand that it has to be seen to do things properly. But we, as an organisation, are quite sophisticated, and still it's quite... oh Lord, you know, it's quite a lot of detail, as it were. Whereas if you are, I suspect, an artist just looking for a bit of help for your art, you might find that rather difficult – NPO Renewed*

As indicated in this data extract, stakeholders recognise that funding applications will necessarily involve a degree of difficulty. As well, a balance seems evident between complexity and feasibility for some applicants, such as individual artists and smaller organisations.

With consideration for the Arts Council's broader role in investing public funds, stakeholders acknowledge the need for organisations to provide robust documentation. Additionally, while recognising the burden that applicants may feel during the application process. It is noteworthy that similar issues were identified in the previous round of Stakeholder Research interviews in 2014, where concerns were raised about the NPO application process in terms of the '*specific requirements of the form and the administrative burden it imposes*' (ICM, 2014). Some stakeholders offered suggestions for how the application process might be improved, which are discussed next.

### 2.1.3. Stakeholders' ideas for streamlining

Some stakeholders express interest in having requirements for the funding application process further streamlined.

One stakeholder suggests the application processes could be improved by filtering organisations in a preliminary stage to ensure applicants are putting their efforts into the funding streams most suitable for their art form or organisational characteristics:

*They may even have a kind of two-stage process, really. Because people have to, organisations have to go to a huge amount of effort to apply for funding. And I think actually they could have a much simplified first stage to see whether, actually, the type of organisation you are, what you're going to achieve, how much you want, what your audiences are, etcetera. They could probably make an assessment of that in quite a simple way, without having to put organisations through an awful lot of hassle, [only] to then be turned down, which I think it's probably very frustrating – NPO Museum Renewed*

As this stakeholder highlights, filtering applicant organisations in a 'simplified' first stage could improve the overall efficiency of the application process. These changes would also lessen the impact that a failed application might have on organisations by limiting the extent of their investment of time/resources in an unsuccessful application. The two-stage structure could also enable quicker feedback for applicants, then adjust based on the type of applicant (e.g., individual or organisation) and size of organisations or projects.

Direct contact between organisations applying for funding and Arts Council representatives is also valued in this context of gaining early feedback.

*I think it would be really good if they had people that would come out and know the organisations. I think it would be better if it was a little bit more straight-forward. It's very expensive to fill in the forms, and it does take a long time – New NPO*

The data extract above from a new NPO highlights the potential perception of the application process as somewhat impersonal. Here, the suggestion is that the Arts Council could develop a more in-depth familiarity with applicants through in-person visits or similar engagement earlier in the application process. This would provide an opportunity for upstream engagement and informal feedback.

### 2.1.4. Grantium

Grantium is a recently introduced online portal for uploading and submitting funding applications for the National Portfolio (2018-22), Grants for the Arts and Artists' International Development Fund programmes. Stakeholders expressed a range of views about their experience and use of the Grantium platform.

There is evidence that some stakeholders may view Grantium as an improvement on past application platforms:

*When I came to it, it worked fine and I thought it was better than the previous system, so it wasn't a problem for me – Unsuccessful NPO*

However, stakeholders also reference many difficulties with their use of Grantium. The prevailing sentiment is frustration with functionalities, such as uploading documents to the platform, which was experienced as problematic due to technical failings. This type of technical issue is evident in stakeholder views, such as the following:

*It affected me in terms of every now and then head banging the desk as material got lost and had to be re-entered – NPO Renewed*

As this data extract indicates, use of Grantium could lead to negative experiences for applicants. This would occur because of technical issues hindering progress in their application process.

In this regard, stakeholders suggest that frustration with using the system can be a barrier to applying. Moreover, the help documentation is viewed as lengthy and difficult to navigate:

*I would have to say that we all underestimate quite how baffling some of the processes that the Arts Council has are for people coming to it for the first time. So, if you look at the help and guidance for using Grantium, how many pages is it, 90 or something? You know, it shouldn't take 90 pages to explain how to use an online funding portal [...] [Grantium] is an ongoing source of frustration and perhaps a barrier to encouraging more people to apply, [a barrier to] a wider and more diverse group of people applying for funding – New NPO*

This data extract indicates concern about negative responses to using the platform by new applicants, who may feel discouraged when technical issues occur and they struggle to find clear guidance.

Regarding specific observations about Grantium use, stakeholders consistently described the platform as unclear and 'clunky':

*It's a bit clunky. It isn't a bespoke system, but actually it is not unworkable. It does look clunky because you can't actually drop things in, in a way that looks nice. It will automatically reformat stuff. So, it's quite difficult to emphasise things or put things in bullet points because they'll just all drop off. But once you get used to that, you know, it's fine – NPO Renewed*

As indicated in these data extracts, such limitations in platform functionality often were only discovered by stakeholders after the platform rejected their desired use. However, once the limitations were discovered, applicants were able to adjust their use and complete their applications.

Yet, even for applicants with experience of the platform, newly discovered limitations can still cause frustration. For example, one stakeholder attempted to use a function that had not been added to the platform:



*I'm due to submit some NPO stuff and I suddenly realised that there isn't the facility to actually do it at the moment over the portal, so I just email it to our relationship manager. So, it is not yet consistent and comprehensive, but it will be – NPO Renewed*

In light of these frustrations, many stakeholders found that technical support from the Arts Council helped resolve issues. In particular, applicants state that phone calls are the most effective option for getting the help they need with the platform:

*I think it [Grantium] is okay. I mean, I don't think it's as bad as some people think it is, and I think, actually, when you ring the help team, they are very helpful – NPO Renewed*

Despite the identified challenges, stakeholders attempted to understand the situation by suggesting that Arts Council might be conflicted between use of a new platform or putting more money into Grantium to make it work better:

*I understand entirely the off the shelf cost-effective nature of it from the Arts Council point of view, and understand the feedback of 'well, we can choose to put more money into a more expensive system or chose to give more money out to Arts Council clients' – NPO Renewed*

Ultimately, stakeholders indicate their desire for Grantium to work better in the future with a number of practical improvements.

## 2.1.5. Decision-making processes

The Arts Council England intends to make funding decisions clear and transparent. Here, stakeholders offer a range of views about application decision-making in terms of both the outcomes and underpinning rationale.

Overall, stakeholders consistently expressed the view that decision-making criteria are clearly communicated by the Arts Council:

*There's a huge long rubric and they tell you what you're going to be judged against and you can write your application against this – NPO Renewed*

As indicated in this data extract, applicants found the criteria to be sufficiently clear to be useful when drafting their application. For some stakeholders, clear criteria expedite the application process. They feel confident they understand how their applications are going to be assessed and which makes drafting applications more straightforward.

However, other stakeholders expressed concern that published criteria may not be applied consistently:

*They state fairly clearly how the decisions are made and what criteria it is going to be. But that's not always so. You think it's on that basis but then that's not always the way that decisions are made. And sometimes it's the convenience of mathematics that make the decision, rather than being founded on a real dialogue about what constitutes value for money within financial decisions relating to the arts – Unsuccessful NPO*

This data extract reflects concern that decision criteria may differ from what the Arts Council communicates. Other stakeholders express concern that Arts Council decision-making should be better connected to 'practice on the ground' for arts and culture organisations:

*There has been an increased distancing between the decision-making aspect of the Arts Council and the practice on the ground – Unsuccessful NPO*

Further concerns are expressed about external pressure influencing the Arts Council's decision-making processes. Some stakeholders believe such influence is a latent factor that sits invisibly alongside clearly established (and public) selection criteria:

*I think what clearly needs more work is where, occasionally, decisions are made that just very patently don't have any of those criteria attached to them. So, there is a feeling that money is awarded, sometimes, arbitrarily, according to who you know and perhaps the pressure that people associated with you might be able to bring on the Arts Council. I get the feeling the rules aren't quite the same for everybody – NPO Library*

As can be seen in the previous data extract, stakeholders' view of decision outcomes depends on perceived fairness, both in patterns of investment they identify and in specific instances that seem to contradict these patterns. When the funding decisions are viewed unfavourably, concerns can surface for stakeholders about whether there was equal treatment of different applicants:

*First of all, of the original 46 clients that the Arts Council had when it first started, every single one of them is still funded. Every single one of them is still funded! Which means that actually all the Arts Council's talk about a 'level-playing field' and its talk about how everybody is treated the same, that is clearly not the case. Secondly, I think that there should be some kind of level-playing field in terms of percentage of support. So, for example, the percentage of Arts Council money that somebody like the Royal Opera House gets- or the Orchestras get- is somewhere between 25% and 30%, and we get 10%. Now the reason we get 10% is because that's what we applied for originally, about 3 years ago when we first became an NPO. [...] This is a big, big, big piece of work, but there is a big piece of work that the Arts Council absolutely needs to do – NPO Renewed*

Overall, the stakeholder responses highlight the importance of having open communication about investment decision making and fair opportunity to receive investment. While stakeholders may see communication about final investment decisions and understand the numbers, doubt is also evident about the Arts Council's underlying rationale supporting the ultimate decisions:

*I mean it's clear who gets it [Arts Council funding]. You know the figures are published, you can access that, and you can find it on the website. But, the 'why' isn't clear. You know, you're sort of hearing some of these over and over again, but it's, it's not directly individual decisions – Past NPO*

This data extract indicates the importance of transparency about the pathway to arrive at investment decisions, as well as final investment outcomes. Indeed, some

stakeholders consider that the Arts Council's decisions could be more public along with the underlying 'internal mechanism' used to make funding decisions:

*The actual decision-making process isn't transparent, is it? Otherwise, you'd have people, you know, a random set of people sitting in the room when [Arts Council] people were making those decisions, or some other [transparency] mechanism. You don't. It's all a very much an internal mechanism, and that's not transparent at all. And you can't appeal it, you can't appeal the decision. You could appeal the process, but you can't appeal the decision – NPO Renewed*

Underpinning this stakeholder's view is uncertainty about final decisions and a feeling that outcomes are not open to scrutiny or appeal by those affected by these decisions.

From these stakeholder perspectives on Arts Council decision processes and outcomes, there is a view that the rationale for specific investment decisions can still be made clearer. The present research identifies the importance of further establishing procedural fairness and decision-making transparency as a way to increase legitimacy of funding criteria and decisions amongst stakeholders.

## 2.1.6. Geographical location

Most stakeholders appreciate that Arts Council's decision criteria and efforts have focused on balancing investment distribution across England:

*One of the big things recently, has been the rebalancing the Portfolio under the investment inside versus outside of London – NPO Renewed*

Stakeholders acknowledge the historic need for the Arts Council's efforts to extend arts and culture investment outside London.

*I think the Arts Council are starting to respond quite significantly to the big pressure they have been put under to rectify the historic concentration of funding within London – NPO Libraries*

Indeed, the movement towards rebalancing distribution of funds to benefit non-London arts and culture organisations has extended to such an extent that the present research revealed some concerns about fairness to London-based organisations.

In this regard, stakeholders express views about the Arts Council's progress with increasing support for individuals and organisations beyond London:

*I'm pleased that in the new round there's more money going to organisations outside London, without hurting the London organisations, which I think is a good thing. I'm pleased that they're putting money into individuals, so whether they're artists or writers, or dancers, or whatever, I think that's a very good thing – NPO Museum Renewed*

Such views hold that funds may now be seen as more fairly distributed to non-London organisations and individual artists.

## London-based arts organisations

Alternatively, stakeholders also indicate that the Arts Council's progress to include organisations outside of London may be having negative impacts on London-based arts organisations:

*It feels like some decisions are being made simply on the basis of trying to move things outside of London. That seems to be as much a priority, or more of a priority than the actual artistic quality or the particular situation. That push to move things outside of London is driving some of the decision-making, which seems in not necessarily the right ways – Past NPO*

The data extract above indicates a stakeholders' view that funding decisions have given priority to an organisation's or artist's geographical location, which may now require further considerations.

Another pathway to stakeholders questioning the way investment is being distributed throughout England is concern about the funding for London-based arts being dominated by large organisations. As the following data extract illustrates, some stakeholders express the view that funds destined for London are being concentrated into large organisations, making access to resources more difficult for smaller organisations:

*The problem is that it has to be spread evenly throughout the country which is no problem. But then, when the majority of the funding goes to one organisation [...] it makes it very, very difficult to everybody [...], it makes it even harder for people in London to get anything – New NPO*

In this way, stakeholders from smaller London-based organisations may feel disadvantaged in their funding applications because geographical criteria limit the pool of resources available to them.

Similarly, one stakeholder states they find the way an organisation is classified as a London or non-London may be problematic in practice because some organisations with a London address may actually operate nationally:

*I think it's perfectly fair that there should be more money given to organisations who work nationally. It's just the decision about who those organisations are, is based on a very blunt instrument: what your postcode is. And the fact that you have a London postcode means that you are a London organisation, end of story. Whereas actually that is actually not true. And I'm not the only organisation that is in that position. There are lots of organisations who work nationally, who have London postcodes, but are caught within this trap, if you like, because that's the only instrument of analysis that the Arts Council uses at the moment. And it really, really needs revisiting – NPO Renewed*

If this shift in approach was to be adopted, organisations could be allowed to state their case to be reclassified as a London or national organisation.

## 2.2. National Portfolio funding programme

The National Portfolio comprises one of the most important sources of investment provided by Arts Council England. Through this programme, the Arts Council invests in arts and cultural organisations, helping them to achieve their objectives. At the same time, the programme aids organisations in aligning to the Arts Council's goals articulated in its 10-year strategy: 'Great arts and culture for everyone'.

For the current National Portfolio investment round (2018-2022), the Arts Council introduced changes aimed at balancing access to investment, reducing the administrative load for small organisations and making larger organisations more accountable. Among the most important changes is the alteration of the NPO investment period, from three to four years.

The following subsections explore stakeholders' overall perception of the NPO programme and their views on changes introduced to the programme. Such changes include the establishment of banding for arts and culture organisations accessing the programme, inclusion of museums and libraries within the National Portfolio and changing the funding cycle.

### 2.2.1. Perception of the value of NPO investment

In general, stakeholders have a positive appraisal of the National Portfolio investment programme and its role in anchoring the arts and culture sector in England.

National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) stakeholders appreciate that the investment brings with it Arts Council support. This is part of a wider support for the continuity of the English arts and cultural scene.

*And this [advocacy] is important because it's vital that [the Arts Council] exists in order to support the arts in the country as well as [...] the funding and the support, the advocacy [...] and the research and everything -NPO Libraries*

This data extract demonstrates stakeholders' positive perception of the NPO programme as a crucial source of support. Participants see it as a symbolically and financially valuable programme for arts and culture organisations:

*[Obtaining NPO investment] will certainly make a difference to us, both from the point of view of our reputation [...] being seen as an NPO, we thought that's quite important to us now. We've sort of grown over our few years as an organisation [and ...] the NPO [status] recognizes that. So, from that point of view, it is a great plus for us. The money, obviously, is also very helpful to us - New NPO*

This participant's explanation shows that stakeholders' strong drive to be a National Portfolio Organisation is related not only to the financial investment they obtain, but also to the symbolic recognition associated with the investment programme.

One reason that the symbolic recognition associated with NPO status can be just as important as the money invested by the Arts Council is that these arts organisations

have a mixed funding model within which the NPO investment is just one part. Indeed, the Arts Council has intentionally made National Portfolio membership compatible with other investment sources, such as private funds. This allows NPOs to obtain further investment for their artistic programme.

*I talk to people outside of the [arts and culture] industry who [incorrectly] still think that the Arts Council funding covers all the funding needs for the arts, so [they incorrectly think] individual donations and things aren't important. And the whole [funding] landscape is changing. I think that message needs to get out [...] They [the Arts Council] are shifting towards that [model], whereby they're looking for you to have other funding partners on board. [...] That [expectation of additional funding sources] is not necessarily the Arts Council's problem or responsibility, [but] I think it's just a reality – Past NPO*

The data extract highlights the dilemma that some arts organisations face in clarifying the nature of their need for private investment alongside the Arts Council's public investment. This could suggest a long-term need for public communication about the nature of arts and culture funding in the contemporary era.

## 2.2.2. Changes to the National Portfolio Programme

For the 2018-2022 funding round, the Arts Council implemented the following changes to the National Portfolio investment programme:

- Museums and libraries and joined the portfolio.
- Banding was introduced in order to classify the organisations according to the amount of investment they receive. This banding divides NPOs into three categories:
  - **Band 1:** organisations that receive a minimum (average) of £40,000 per year and a maximum (average) of £249,999 per year.
  - **Band 2:** organisations that receive a minimum (average) of £250,000 per year and a maximum (average) of £999,999 per year.
  - **Band 3:** organisations will receive a minimum (average) of £1,000,000 per year.
- The funding cycle changed to four years, instead of three.

The stakeholders in the present research welcome these changes overall. For example, stakeholders indicate that this latest NPO investment round has resulted in a 'diverse' National Portfolio:

*The investment spread when it was announced, it felt fairly diverse to me in terms of scale, size, art form, and location. I think there's always more work to be done, [...] particularly when it comes to Band 1. [...] But, I think it feels like a pretty diverse portfolio. I think that they have made some brave decisions, in terms of cutting long-term clients. They are kind of churning and making sure that [they are] remaining relevant today. I mean, there's only so much money to go around – New NPO*

This data extract emphasises improvements in the range of funded arts organisations brought by changes to the NPO and ensuring that organisations receiving this public investment stay current and relevant.

However, some stakeholders indicate that the process for seeking investment can be improved to make it less bureaucratic and more attuned to the arts and culture sector.

*[The Arts Council] talked about having less bureaucracy within their next phase of NPO funding. And, certainly I can't see that it's any less bureaucratic, and I would think is probably more so. So, any organisation which comes up every now and then with a new big idea, whether that's about protective characteristics or quality metrics, or environmental [regulations] is constantly dancing to a government tune. [...] It is not about understanding the client base or understanding the art. It's about all sorts of other things. I'm not suggesting for a moment that that's not what has to happen, if you are funded through the DCMS, and then indeed through the government – NPO Renewed*

Indeed, changes in the National Portfolio are perceived to have introduced requirements that some stakeholders perceive as an imposition of government requirements that are inappropriate for the arts and culture sector.

Despite recognition that the Arts Council has been building the capacities of NPOs over the years to help them access NPO investment, there was a view of the NPO application process as somewhat excessive in its intensity and expectations.

*The 2015-18 NPO system was a bit of a shock to the sector, and quite a number of organisations lost regular funding. Over the past 3 years, the Arts Council has trained up the people within the NPO pool about what it is that they expect from that group. [In] the next iteration of it, most people are looking at a flatline grant or perhaps even less, and are mandated to do many more things. And they [the Arts Council] said they weren't going to do that. They said it was going to be a light touch, and I don't think it is – NPO Renewed*

The data suggest that this perceived increase in complexity and requirements has not been well received by all stakeholders. In spite of these concerns, overall, stakeholders perceive that they are being better understood by the Arts Council. As the following data extract shows, stakeholders see the change in communication in a positive manner:

*And I'd say the expertise I'm working [on] at the moment is, is significant, and that is hugely appreciated. It makes a difference. Just in feeling that you're understood – Past NPO*

This is related to the opportunity some organisations have had to continue developing the work that they do, with Arts Council support. Organisations that are new to the National Portfolio, like libraries and museums, are particularly appreciative of this opportunity, as the following section explores.

### 2.2.3. Introduction of Museums and Libraries to the NPO

Overall, representatives of the museums and libraries appraised their inclusion in the National Portfolio as positive.

*Well, it seems to be really excellent because I think the fact that it wasn't something we were expecting to be able to apply, to become an NPO. We were looking at how we might sustain what we were doing throughout Grant for the Arts, how we could possibly continue that in the long-term. So, this was an absolutely excellent opportunity [...] to come up – NPO Library*

As the data extract above shows, stakeholders believe that the inclusion of libraries and museums in the National Portfolio has increased the opportunities of these organisations to sustain their activities in the longer term. Moreover, participants recognise that the Arts Council has made a great effort in communicating with museums. One participant highlighted the Arts Council's understanding of the needs of these kind of organisations:

*I think because the [Arts Council's] understanding of how the sector has grown, we are now much more confident that the programs that they are trusting us to deliver actually further our needs and our needs are acceptable to their objectives [...] [The Arts Council is] genuinely interested in how we operate and what motivates us. I found it really refreshing actually because you sensed that they were in 'listening mode', which is good – NPO Museum New*

As the feedback highlights, some museums feel the Arts Council has engaged with them to understand how their specific goals and operations fit within the Arts Council's objectives.

Similarly, other stakeholders call attention to the support that is provided to libraries within the National Portfolio as a promising sign. For example, in the following data extract, the stakeholder expresses satisfaction with including the Society of Chief Librarians in the National Portfolio, identifying this as a wise choice by the Arts Council:

*And also with having a SCL, as in Society Chief Librarians, support organisation, that's a really good move. Because that will support libraries even more and more [...] and really embed the work the Arts Council is doing across the sector – NPO Library*

Furthermore, stakeholders believe that the changes will enrich organisations. For example, one of representative from a museum stated:

*There will be lessons to learn for us in the museum world from [including museums in the NPO investment programme], and I think there'll be a lot of lessons in the countryside to learn about proper entrepreneurialism and funding and income generation, which will broaden both [...], the traditional sector and the museum sectors. [...] Which can only be for the good – NPO Museum New*

This data extract shows the view that including museums and libraries in the National Portfolio can enhance the performance of the whole arts and cultural sector.



However, there were some doubts expressed about how well the Arts Council understands museums and libraries. Other participants indicated that the Arts Council needs to improve its understanding about the specific needs of museums and libraries.

*I think the possible losers of it would be libraries and museums because it's going to take a while for the Arts Council to develop that kind of expertise to support them – SSO*

However, stakeholders note that adjustments would be required for some libraries to meet the NPO requirements:

*it is quite a difficult shift for libraries to think about applying for [NPO investment]. I think only the ones that have been already obviously given a lot of arts-related work were in that position [to seek NPO investment] – NPO Library*

The libraries that develop activities that can be clearly framed under the category of arts find the process of participating in the National Portfolio programme easier. Other library stakeholders express concern that they should tailor their case for investment to an arts-centric approach to meet the Arts Council's interests.

## 2.2.4. Banding of investment

Stakeholders appreciate the introduction of banding to the NPO programme. Categorising NPOs in terms of the investment received and the required responsibilities was identified as a step that can help widen the impact of the programme.

*My perception is that in this round, they've gone a long way to open up the portfolio – New NPO*

As the previous data extracts highlights, stakeholders understand banding to be necessary for the improvement of the NPO programme, as well as increasing the reach of the Arts Council.

However, some stakeholders have questions about the level of contribution from Band 3 organisations. One participant expressed this view as follows:

*I would [have positive thoughts on banding] if it meant that Band 3 organisations genuinely are there to help the broader community [...] within our area, for example, Upper North, takes an enormous amount of money, compared with all other organisations locally [...] and, clearly, if they had a role of being supportive of artists and a much broader community, I'm sure everybody would appreciate it – NPO Renewed*

As the above data extract show, some stakeholders indicated that organisations who receive a minimum investment of £1,000,000 per year, need to improve their support to the broader community and individual artists. Because of their size, these organisations are seen to take up a large part of the Arts Council's investment. This is questioned by some of the participating organisations, who consider that the investment needs to be reflected in output which benefits local communities as a whole. As another participant stated, some stakeholders consider that:

*The "big boys" always get the money – NPO Renewed*

Similarly, another stakeholder expresses concern about the way large organisations are chosen. In the following data extract, the participant states the perception that some of the funding for large organisations is renewed because of their importance in the arts and cultural scene, rather than the merits of their projects:

*We know that, because they've announced it, it's a much bigger portfolio the next round. I always worry for the Arts Council, that they are trapped really, by funding a small number, probably, 15 or 20 very large organisations, and they really don't have much choice [...] other than to continue to fund them. And I [...] don't think that's necessarily very healthy because it boxes them into what they might want to do in the future. And they're often organisations that are so well known, some of them [...] Many of them are in a very good position to try and raise revenue from lots of other sources – NPO Museum Renewed*

Despite this assessment of funding for large organisations, stakeholders suggest that that the 2018-2022 National Portfolio opens up space for a wider variety of organisations. As indicated in the following data extract, there is a view of openings for new organisations to join the National Portfolio:

*I don't think that anybody can doubt that when you look at the Portfolio there is a variety of sizes, however, there is more of a fight at the grassroots level. I think that is because obviously larger organisations take such a big chunk of the available funds. Often, small organisations are fighting for a crunch. And so, there is a bigger turnover of the smaller organisations which means that they are never given the opportunity to establish and grow because it is thought of turns. And as a turn on the bottom level, if you are lucky you might do two turns, but then they feel they need to renew that. So, nobody is ever given the chance to grow as a solid organisation. I don't think it is possible for a smaller organisation to grow like it used to be – SSO*

Nevertheless, the evidence above also highlights the perception of some stakeholders about large organisations benefiting the most from the National Portfolio because the division of funds between the large number of small organisations means that NPOs in Bands 1 and 2 compete for smaller amount of money.

Another stakeholder expresses concern with how banding is going to work in the future and that it not be possible to apply under a different band in future rounds:

*We were clearly told, or sort of clearly told, that once you were in a band you probably be in that band forever. I mean if you've been in band 1 you stay in band 1, and it's very difficult to then move up to band 2 for the next round, which seems to be mad, really. This is so restrictive because you know, who knows what'll happen in the future, what aspirations we'll have – New NPO Library*

This stakeholder is uncertain to what extent banding will be restrictive for new NPO's whether aspirations will be accounted for in future funding rounds.

Another stakeholder questions the Arts Council's evaluation of different stakeholders and the affect on funding allocation:

*First of all, of the original 46 clients that the Arts Council had when it first started, every single one of them is still funded. Which means that, actually, all the Arts Council talks about "a level-playing field" and it talks about how everybody is treated the same, that is clearly not the case. Secondly, I think that there should be some kind of level-playing field in terms of percentage of support [...] I think, that there is some huge inherent unfairness in the way that the organisations are funded by the Arts Council. [...] But, no analysis has been done in terms of level-playing field, and percentages, and all of that sort of thing. – NPO Renewed*

The data extract above regards concerns about the allocation of funding. They consider that there is not an equal 'playing field' between the different applicants to the National Portfolio programme. Specifically, large organisations may be seen to maintain their funding because of their reputation, rather than for impact in their local communities, and thus have not had to justify the support they receive from the Arts Council in the same way.

### 2.2.5. Change from 3-year to 4-year funding cycle

The funding cycle for the NPO programme has been modified. In previous iterations, the cycle had a duration of 3 years, while in the 2018-2022 cycle it has been extended to 4 years. Overall, stakeholders welcome this extension of the funding cycle duration, as it provides continuity to the processes developed by the NPOs:

*It's great. [It's] mind-bending to do that 4-year planning[...], [but] not having to go through an NPO [funding] round for 1 year longer, to have the certainty to be able to have a longer-term vision and our aims and strategies within it, is immensely helpful. So that sums up [why it is a] good move [to extend the funding cycle] – NPO Renewed*

As the data extract above illustrates, changes in the financing cycle are providing NPOs with stability and confidence about their futures, which enables them to develop projects with a long-term vision. Indeed, stakeholders highlight benefits of extending the funding cycle such as the opportunity to plan ahead with greater confidence.

*[The change] is just positive. Because we have Creative Europe money. [...] It's frightening enough, what's going on and in terms of where we are with Creative Europe money and everything else. So, the fact that we've got 4 years of stability within the Arts Council is just fantastic – NPO Renewed*

The data extract compares investment from other programmes, such as Creative Europe, the stability of the Arts Council's NPO investment offers a firm foundation for the future.

## 2.3. Grants for the Arts

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Grants for the Arts (GFTA) is an investment programme aimed at individuals (artists and people working in the arts), art organisations and organisations working with arts. GFTA provides investment for activities carried out over a set period of time, engaging local communities with arts and cultural activities in England. Grants can cover up to 90% of the cost of the project and range from £1,000 to £100,000.

This section explores stakeholders' views about the GFTA programme. Second, it provides an overview of how the application process is experienced. Third, it looks at relationships between Grantees and the Arts Council. Finally, it presents stakeholder suggestions for improvements.

### 2.3.1. Stakeholder views

The programme is perceived as an entry point to Arts Council funding for arts organisations. Indeed, many participants in this study reported that they applied for and/or received investment from GFTA before applying to larger programmes such as the National Portfolio. According to stakeholders, GFTA investment plays a crucial role for individuals and small organisations in the sector. However, there appears to be lack of information from the Arts Council about art forms strategies that may be relevant to some stakeholders:

*Our communication with the Arts Council, apart from our relationship manager- which has been very good- any other information about the strategy of our art form and our relationship with the Arts Council has been non-existent – GFTA*

GFTA investment sometimes acts as a cornerstone source of funding for emerging arts organisations and artists, providing them with the necessary resources to develop. Although this is good for emerging artists and organisations, participants indicated that some small organisations and individuals that do not feel prepared, or who are ineligible for NPO investment, adapt their projects in order to be GFTA-eligible.

*(...) they will still have lots of artists and organisations who rely on Grants for the Arts (...). I think the problem with this is that, because Grants for the Arts has to essentially [invest in] a new project, you do have lots of people going back to tweak or try to develop their work so that it can be processed for Grants for the Arts. And I think this is quite rightly so, because you're just not going to have an organisation or an artist pop up where they'll never need support again. That's the reality of the situation – New NPO, GFTA*

As suggested above, some artists and organisations re-framed their projects as 'new' so they can be considered viable for GFTA investment.

This pattern of trying to string together a set of GFTA investments to establish a longer term funding base was viewed as necessary in light of scarce resources and limited space in other funding schemes.

*(...) there are many organisations that are continually funded through Grants for the Arts because there isn't enough room in the [National] Portfolio for them – New NPO, GFTA*

Such responses suggest that GFTA investments are in some cases acting as a secondary funding option for organisations that would prefer other, more stable or long-term investment programmes.

### 2.3.2. Challenges of applying for GFTA investment

Despite its status as a key funding source for individual artists and small arts organisations, participants viewed the process of applying for GFTA funding as challenging for these categories of applicant.

*From an individual's point of view, as an individual artist, then I guess that's quite a big investment [of time/effort]. Perhaps they don't [have] the resources to sustain the application process itself – New NPO, GFTA*

As can be seen in the data extract above, for an individual or a very small organisation seeking GFTA support, the application is viewed as a demanding process in terms of the time and human resources required.

There was acknowledgement that the difficulty level for GFTA applications can be proportional to the investment sought, thereby minimising the administrative burden for small projects.

*I know there's the under-£15K grant option, which means that the application will be shorter, and the assessment time shorter, and the reporting will be less demanding. I think the reporting for Grants for the Arts is quite minimal, really – New NPO, GFTA*

Stakeholders also anticipate this proportionality at other funding levels (above £15,000), however there was interest in having the expectations for different scales of investment clarified.

*I think Grants for the Arts, (...), I think when it gets up to the bigger award, it's less clear what extra they are looking for other than 'you're somebody we like'. So once you get up to maybe, an award of £100,000, £75,000, £80,000, what kind of work is the Arts Council looking for at that scale? Other than what kind of quality we should have at that scale? So, they talk about things like wider sector impact (...) that's a bit more nebulous. So, I think that demonstrating that you are the type of organisation [they are looking for] becomes much more important for that bigger level. You become somebody the Arts Council can trust with a £100,000 – New NPO, GFTA*

The data extract above indicates that stakeholders would appreciate a greater level of clarity in terms of what is expected from the GFTA at different investment levels.

### 2.3.3. Relationships: Grantees and the Arts Council

In comparison with NPOs, there is evidence that GFTA grantees believe there is room for improvement in extending their relationship with the Arts Council beyond the grant platform and written guidelines:

*If you're not an NPO, it is quite difficult to understand who anyone is in the Arts Council [...]. This is true particularly if your organisation is a kind of combined arts organisation like we are, rather than one single art form [...] So, I think that It's not as clear as it could be, if you receive Grants for the Arts funding, what your relationship is with the Arts Council. You obviously have relationship with Grantium – New NPO, GFTA*

As shown above, without direct access to relationship managers, GFTA grantees tend to perceive their relationship with the Arts Council to be less close than NPOs.

### 2.3.4. Stakeholders' suggestions for improvement

While the GFTA programme was recognised as the most appropriate available funding option for smaller organisations or individuals, one participant suggested that there should be an application process that was even more straightforward for those at the earliest stages of development as artists or arts organisations:

*Grants for the Arts, which is supposed to be an entry-level kind of the first room really [...], for artist or individuals or whoever, to gain some funding. I mean, it's simply not an entry-level funding system. [...] You have to have a level of experience, skill and understanding of how things work in order to unlock that [funding]. And I think that there's another tier missing there in terms of a wider chance of support – New NPO*

The data extract above highlights concern that the application process for a GFTA investment requires knowledge and expertise that might exceed the capacities of 'entry-level' individuals and small organisations.

Stakeholders appreciate the feedback provided by the Arts Council on GFTA application results:

*If you look at things like Grants for the Arts, we've always had really good, practical feedback if an application hasn't been successful. Or if it's being successful, they want to fund it but they've said, 'Actually, you really need to strengthen this bit here' – New NPO*

As can be seen in the data extract above, stakeholders appreciate feedback when provided. This allows for improvements to be made on subsequent applications. This is crucial for small organisations and individuals, who see GFTA as an entry level investment opportunity that can set them up for the future, if they are supported to succeed.

The Grants for the Arts (GFTA) funding pathway works to provide support for small organisations and individual artists to help increase diversity in art forms and audiences. However, aspects of the GFTA application process can also be experienced as complex and time intensive. Therefore, stakeholders highlight their interest in improved guidelines and keeping feedback mechanisms in place.

## 2.4. Local Authorities

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Local authorities are a crucial partner for the Arts Council. Local authorities' connections with grassroots groups, local not-for-profit organisations and community-level services have great potential to contribute to the arts and culture sector across England.

### 2.4.1. Overall relationship

From the local authority perspective, there is clear appreciation for the Arts Council as an institution and for its multi-faceted role:

*[The Arts Council] is important because, creativity has a national voice and a national body to represent the difference it [arts] makes in people's lives. It is diverse, as it seeks to promote opportunity for a wide range of people, recognising the barriers to do it [engage people with arts]. And [it is] Inspirational, because it funds work with children and young people, that builds resilience and support and encourages challenging work –*  
*Local Authority*

The data extract above shows recognition of the Arts Council's key roles such as acting as an advocate for the art and culture sector. This recognition that the Arts Council has an important contribution to make at the local authority level offers a strong foundation for collaboration.

The Arts Council is viewed as supporting local authorities in achieving community development goals:

*[The Arts Council's] support for arts and health makes us understand arts as a tool for local development –*  
*Local Authority*

It was noted that the potential of arts to generate meaningful changes in local communities is enhanced when the Arts Council creates synergies with local authorities' agendas.

*For ourselves as a local authority, we have to work with quite specific [policy] agendas to make a difference in people's lives in the borough. So it has been our focus: participating in community arts. And some of the initiatives like "Find your talent", "the music hubs", the "In Harmony" programme, all of these initiatives tied up with a local authority agenda, and with the part [of the agenda that] local authorities have had a difficult time. So it gives us the capacity to work with third sector organisations and provide them with the means to use the arts. Other partners, such as care homes, and care institutions, we advise them to get funds from the Arts Council –*  
*Local Authority*

As the data extract above highlights, local authorities see potential in participation in Arts Council programmes and activities to enhance community welfare.

However, local authorities face increasing pressure to provide services, with concern about their long-term role in supporting arts and culture becoming increasingly evident:

*From the local authority point of view, I don't think that the fault is the Arts Council overly. I think the problem we face as a sector, which is trying to use the arts and culture to support community, the problem we face is that local authorities are against the wall at the moment. So what can be changed is a dialogue, a dialogue about what would be the appropriate support for those people still within the local authority trying to make a difference using the arts. I don't know what could be changed. I think that the days of arts and culture being driven by local authorities are numbered – Local Authority*

This context casts a shadow over the collaborative role that the Arts Council and local authorities have in developing 'great art for everyone'. Yet, local authorities are willing to engage with the Arts Council, suggest ways of improving coordination and future planning.

## 2.4.2. Investment processes and local authorities

One need that was highlighted is to ensure that timeframes for funding applications are not so short that local authorities are hard-pressed to get applications submitted in time:

*Sometimes it feels that some of the bigger programmes are already being allocated to people, and the benefit does not necessarily [...] stretch over to local authorities [...]. And some of the bigger organisations who may have additional resources, or even better funding offices linked to them can respond to the applications for some of the bigger funding quickly. Some of the deadlines are impossible for local authorities to have time to say "ok, I'll have look, and in three weeks write a very good partnership bid". We are being caught on a situation where there is not the capacity [to respond] – Local Authority*

This data extract is raising the issue that local authorities with limited human resources may not have the spare capacity to respond within short funding application windows.

A related issue is the view that the National Portfolio and other larger funding programmes were not as open to local authorities' applications as GFTA investment:

*Grants for the Arts, I think is a really good [investment] programme. I think it is accessible, easy to apply for, communities understand it and the amount of money that can be given on that and the turnaround is good. It's still the most accessible means to make a difference at the community level. But for some of the bigger [investment] initiatives, it is so competitive that it can be frustrating. As much as we put together significant partners before we try hard on bids together, we worked really hard to get nowhere, and got very poor feedback [in the 2015-2018 NPO round] – Local Authority*

This feeling of frustration due to unsuccessful efforts to gain investment beyond GFTA was contrasted with the reported experience with special investment programmes relating to music, which were valued for the direct engagement with the funder that was offered:



*We have been benefited as a local authority from bigger [investment] initiatives in the past, such as “find your talent”, and “harmony”. So, we got really good relationships with [anonymised], who was our lead officer within the music programme. [The lead officer] was very supportive and flexible around what we are doing here. If I needed [the lead officer] I can contact [the lead officer]. We were having a very direct conversation about how we were delivering the programme and how we should be doing it. So at the programme level, [it was a] very good experience - Local Authority*

These special investment programmes- “Find Your Talent” and “In Harmony”- were valued in large part because of the strong working relationship with the funder representative.

These types of strong relationships between the local authority and the Arts Council have the potential to yield positive impact for both sides, allowing them to build capacity:

*The [key strength of working with the Arts Council is] understanding and the knowledge. That is, I understand where to draw support information from the Arts Council officers I speak to, and I like to believe they understand that we know how to deliver within tough communities to make a difference within [them]- Local Authority*

The data extract above illustrates the kind of synergy envisioned by participants within the context of a good relationship between the Arts Council and local authorities.

### 2.4.3. Aligning Arts Council and local authority priorities

Fostering ongoing dialogue and co-construction of understanding is crucial for local authorities to have a better appraisal of the strategic priorities of the Arts Council, and how these priorities can be pegged to their particular goals:

*I don't see the strategic reasoning put forward when I see what the public are wanting from the Arts Council, or ask someone who cares about community development. When they look at the previous years' [Stakeholder Research] reports, then the things I'm interested in is arts for health and wellbeing and community development, which is pretty low down in the priority list of what the public want – Local Authority*

As the data extract above indicates, it is felt that key local authority priorities are not listed as priorities for the Arts Council. However, these goals are compatible with the Arts Council's 10-year strategy “Great art and culture for everyone”, suggesting a need for engagement and alignment of terminology.

To this end, the research suggests the Arts Council will need to take the leadership role and support a structural shift in how arts will be embedded in local communities:

*So, supporting change models, some sort initiatives that support the how we embed the arts and culture in communities in a way that is sustainable given that local authorities won't be the drivers – Local Authority.*

Given that local authorities may not be in a position to drive change in this context, the Arts Council's role becomes crucial to ensure that local authorities are effectively engaged in the process of implementing arts and culture as a crucial aspect of community development.

#### 2.4.4. Areas for improvement

To aid the ongoing development of local authorities' arts and culture roles, it is suggested that the Arts Council strengthen the current relationship it has with local authorities:

*Given the cuts, [the Arts Council] has less capacity to have relationships managers. I could tell you that I have meet somebody who was a relationship manager, I invited them to a section in which we were supporting local communities' arts. That was probably 18 months ago, and that would be the last contact I had with a relationship manager. And before that, I really could not tell you – Local Authority.*

The data extract above illustrates the perception of a relationship between the Arts Council and local authorities that could be more responsive. Given the clear value from close engagement with relationship managers identified in Section 1 of this report, this could be a beneficial domain for enhancing the Arts Council's work with local authorities.

# Conclusions and Recommendations



### 3. Conclusions and Recommendations

This research provides a straightforward look into the perceptions of the Arts Council England's stakeholders and opinion formers with regard to its role within the arts and culture sector, relationships, communication and leadership. The research focused on several topics divided into two main sections:

Perceptions of the Arts Council as an organisation

Perception of Investment programmes

This chapter provides conclusions and recommendations to facilitate practical adjustments from this research. This chapter is divided based on the sections noted above.

## Section 1: Perceptions of the Arts Council England as an organisation

### Perceptions of the Arts Council as an organisation

Arts Council and  
its Role

Working  
Relationships

Communications

Equality and  
diversity

Section 1 of the report highlights the many positive associations stakeholders have with the Arts Council: a vital funder, great support for the arts and cultural organisations, and an advocate for the arts and culture sector, are just a few. Genuine commitment to the sector and its development were shown to be very important qualities of the Arts Council. Furthermore, among the stakeholders, there is a widespread understanding and support for the 10-year strategy and the more specific goals and objectives that go along with it. In general, it has been communicated well over the years, and many stakeholders identify with most of the goals.

The report shows stakeholders' great appreciation for the Arts Council's staff, especially the relationship managers. Their contact at a very personal level and the support they provide, and their engagement with the specific art forms, is shown to be one of the best strengths of the Arts Council. This ties in with the overall positive perception of the frequency of communication and channels of communication. However, the newsletter and Grantium (as a communication channel) received mixed appraisals. Furthermore, communication beyond immediate stakeholders is generally shown to be satisfactory, although partnering up a bit more with arts organisations would enhance the impact of this. This research also showed the appreciation of the leadership role that the Arts Council England takes in equality and diversity subjects.

Diversity in terms of audiences is widely thought to be an important part of meeting different needs in arts and culture. However, stakeholders recognise that the wider arts and culture sector in general, and larger organisations in particular, also struggle to be diverse, and adequately reflect wider British society.

The Creative Case is appraised as a positive way of understanding the processes of organisations and how well their diversity policies are functioning in practice. As part of the Creative case, the Art Council assesses the organisations included on the National Portfolio to assess their performance around equality and diversity. The need for stronger definitions is linked to the way the Arts Council assesses organisations' contribution to the Creative Case. An approach to such shared learning may help institutions address remaining questions about what 'success' looks like in implementing the Creative Case.

## Section 2: Perceptions of investment programmes and working partnerships

### Perception of Investment programmes

Application for investment

National Portfolio funding programme

Grants for the Arts

Local Authorities

Section two discussed the perceptions stakeholders have about the different investment programmes, such as the National Portfolio Organisations and Grants for the Arts, as well as the Arts Council's partnership working with local authorities. The research uncovered a range of views on the funding process and partnerships.

Overall, stakeholders perceive that there is a necessity to distribute the Arts Council's investment around England. Despite stakeholders recognising the Arts Council's push to include organisations throughout England within its investments, stakeholders felt a regional divide still exists, with non-London regions needing greater investment and development from the Arts Council.

However, some London-based organisations feel the redistribution of funds has disadvantaged them in the decision-making processes. These stakeholders are particularly concerned about smaller London organisations having limited access to investment.

In stakeholder responses about Arts Council funding application processes, the guidelines for applying for funding were seen as helpful and extensive.

The different changes to the NPO funding process incorporated in the current funding cycle were also well received. Stakeholders highlighted the wider diversity of the funded organisations, expressed a positive assessment of the introduction of museums and libraries to the Portfolio and strongly praised the change in length of the funding cycle from the 3-to-4-year cycle.

In addition to the favourable comments, section two of the report also showed some critical views held by stakeholders. A key theme was the perceived complexity of the application process. This includes the task of gathering and ordering the evidence necessary to fill in different application fields. The requirements are viewed as complex and sometimes excessive in comparison to the available funding.

Despite generally positive stakeholder views about application guidelines, the process of seeking funding from the Arts Council is viewed as burdensome for smaller or less experienced arts organisations. In this sense, some stakeholders identify the application processes as challenging to undertake. When asked to describe the investment processes, some stakeholders used words like 'complex' and 'long' to express their views.

In this regard, it was implied that guidelines may be easier to follow for larger NPOs or those already familiar with Arts Council terminology. One stakeholder explained that individual artists and grassroots organisations that are less familiar with the Arts Council can sometimes find the language used in the application forms and guidelines difficult to understand or discern the meaning. That is, for some stakeholders, the language used in the guidelines and application forms is easier for experienced cultural organisations and individuals with an arts background, but could be a barrier for less experienced applicants, such as individual artists and grassroots organisations. This feedback emphasises the significance of how investment programme guidelines are framed, highlighting the risks that can come with having application processes that the 'uninitiated' might experience as inaccessible or overly complex. This may represent a *communications gap* for some groups due to discernibility of Arts Council meanings or terminology definitions. Improvements can be made by simplifying the language used in the guidelines, as well as explicitly defining key concepts so less organisations unfamiliar with Arts Council terminology can still benefit from Arts Council investment on an equal footing.

There is recognition among stakeholders of the need for cost-effective solutions and for a system to simplify application processes. While stakeholders generally expressed frustration with the Grantium portal, there was some forgiveness due to an assumption that the portal must *still be in early stages of development*. Regardless, the overall sentiment stakeholders expressed is that they do *not* see the portal helping to make the application process easier. Some stakeholders also suggest greater clarity about the portal's current functionality could help improve its usability.

At the same time, most of the stakeholders who both ran into problems while using the platform and called Arts Council for support were able to receive the help they needed. This has important implications for the Arts Council's internal resources because there appears to be a requirement that direct communication be available to address questions and queries about the platform and any apparent contradictions with the Arts Council guidance that comes up. This research indicates that while greater customer support can offset design limitations in the platform, it will likely be a better use of resources to require that the Grantium supplier implement fixes through stakeholder-focused development and intensive user testing of the platform. The results are clear that better, more intuitive design is still necessary for Grantium to live up to stakeholders' expectations.

In a number of cases, stakeholders had a positive view of the inclusivity of Arts Council decision-making based on the patterns of investment they had seen. However, this report also showed that some stakeholders would like to see transparency about investment decision-making brought forward to encompass earlier stages of the decision-making process. Greater transparency about the basis for selecting priorities and the exact scoring criteria to be used for applications would help to combat the feeling that decision-making takes place within a type of 'black box'

Lacking such details, some stakeholders were found to be drawing inferences about external pressure influencing the Arts Council's decision-making processes, with some stakeholders believing such outside influences comprise a latent factor that sits invisibly alongside clearly established (and public) selection criteria. For this reason, the Arts Council would benefit from further enhancement of the existing mechanisms designed to give stakeholders an understanding of how and why specific investment decisions are made.

## Recommendations

In light of these findings, we provide the following recommendations:

- In order to reduce the perceived bureaucratic burden of applying for funds, we recommend assessing options for reducing the expected amount of paperwork for the funding applications.
  - o First, develop a method of accurately assessing the median and range of time required to complete a given form and supporting documentation.
  - o An (imperfect) example of this kind of analysis and disclosure to stakeholders is the Paperwork Reduction Act in the United States, which requires a Public Burden Statement for each application and reporting form. Thus, each Federal form has a statement such as 'The reporting burden for this information collection is estimated to be 30 minutes. This burden estimate includes time for reviewing instructions, researching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the needed data, and completing and submitting the information.'
  - o Once a standardised measure of the paperwork burden is in place, the amount of paperwork can be tailored to the amount of investment an organisation is applying for. This approach can reduce the amount of time – and therefore cost - organisations face in preparing applications, encouraging small and grassroots organisations to apply for funding by reducing this obstacle.
  - o In addition, we recommend introducing a pre-application filtering process to offer guidance about the most appropriate funding scheme to apply to and a two-stage structure for applications. This would enable quicker feedback for applicants, and limit the total investment of resources by applicants by only requiring full applications from those with a high probability of success.
- A suggested improvement for the clarity of the strategy and for showing how progress could be measured would be to have strategies tailored to each of the range of art forms that the Arts Council supports. Framing the strategy and the five goals in art form-specific terms and contexts would be a useful way to clarify their significance and implications for each arts and culture organisation. Also, incorporating explicit discussion of different art forms within the implementation of initiatives such as the Creative Case for Diversity could make it easier for individuals in the sector to see how general strategies and initiatives apply in their particular context. In sum, having specific goals attuned to each art form could help stakeholders transform well-known strategic goals into practical action.



Furthermore, the terminology of the goals can be aligned to suit the priorities of local authorities better. These proactive steps to enhance communication to its stakeholders will require the Arts Council to get feedback on phrasing and framing of policy for different art forms and categories of stakeholders.

- There is a need for either better communication of the rationale for requiring quantitative metrics (e.g. where Treasury requires numerical data) or a more in-depth upstream engagement with the sector about what is worth measuring and how. For example, the Arts Council can provide clearer statements about why “Quality Metrics” are relevant to the Arts Council’s strategic aims, how the Arts Council is ensuring the metrics are credible by following established best practice in social survey methods, how these metrics will be used within the funding process and a greater emphasis on partnership with the sector. This is important to mitigate the view held by some stakeholders that this kind of “top-down” initiative is not aligned with the realities of artistic practice and shows the Arts Council is unresponsive to sector concerns. Further implementation of ‘metrics’ requirements in the sector may benefit from recognised social scientific expert guidance and drawing on successful examples of metrics implementation from outside the arts and culture sector.
- In order to reinforce the partnership between the Arts Council and its stakeholders, rather than the Arts Council merely being a funder, the Arts Council should build on the trust developed by its relationship managers to facilitate an ongoing (rather than every 3-4 years) approach to research about its service delivery, communications and perceptions within the sector. This can be connected to more regular communication to and from senior Arts Council officers (which is viewed favourably) to ensure stakeholders are kept informed and senior-level decision-makers at the Arts Council can be better connected to ‘practice on the ground’ for arts and culture organisations.
- Stakeholders see a need to review and lighten the workload of relationship managers to allow them to fully engage with grantees.
- The Arts Council can extend its communication about the rationale for its funding decisions, so they are clear and public. This will increase the favourable perception of the Arts Council being transparent and decrease stakeholder concerns about the legitimacy of decision-making processes.

# Appendices



## ***Appendix - Stakeholder audiences included in this research***

<b>Target Audience</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Stakeholders</b>	Individuals with an interest in or is affected by the Arts Council's work. This is used on occasion as a collective term for respondents in this research.
<b>NPOs</b>	<p>NPOs, or National Portfolio Organisations, are organisations which the Arts Council funds via its National portfolio funding programme.</p> <p>The programme officially launched on 1 April 2012 and provides funding for a portfolio of 696 organisations.</p> <p>The current funding programme runs from 2012-15. This is soon to be replaced with the new funding programme, which runs from 2015-18. All organisations who wished to be funded via this programme submitted applications and were informed in July 2014 of the outcome of their application.</p> <p>This research covers organisations which are new to the National portfolio funding programme in 2015-18 (that is, they have not previously been funded); those who have had their funding renewed; those who were funded in 2012-15 but have not reapplied for funding; and those who were unsuccessful in their application for the 2015-18 programme.</p>
<b>Opinion formers</b>	Opinion formers are defined as senior representatives from the arts and cultural sector, including leading and high-profile artists; arts and culture professionals; think tanks and lobby groups.
<b>Artists</b>	These are individuals who receive 'Grants for the Arts' (GFTA) funding. This is a Lottery-funded grant programme for individuals, arts organisations and other people who use the arts in their work which is administered by the Arts Council.
<b>Local Authorities</b>	These are representatives from local authorities who work in partnership with the Arts Council to support the arts.
<b>Libraries</b>	<p>Although the Arts Council is not responsible for providing or funding library services, in October 2011 it took over responsibility for supporting and developing libraries.</p> <p>This group therefore consists of opinion formers from the library sector.</p>
<b>SSO</b>	

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