The arts debate – Arts Council England’s first-ever public value inquiry: Overview and design

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What is the arts debate?
The arts debate is Arts Council England’s first-ever public value inquiry. It is a large-scale public engagement exercise to explore the value that our stakeholders expect to see generated through public investment in the arts. The arts debate is part of a broader programme of research and policy development that seeks to address our key strategic challenges around public participation, value and accountability in the arts. The specific contribution of the arts debate is to engage our stakeholders in a new dialogue about these challenges and to ensure that our future policy better reflects their needs and aspirations.

Phase one of the arts debate will run from autumn 2006 to summer 2007. During this period the inquiry will seek to answer three key research questions:

i How is public value currently created, or perceived to be created, by the arts?
ii What would it mean for the Arts Council and the individuals and organisations we fund to create greater value for the public?
iii How can our aspirations to create greater value for the public best be balanced against the value that we seek to create for other stakeholders, particularly the artistic community and our partners in central and local government?

The inquiry will seek to answer these questions through a programme of robust and innovative research with our key stakeholder groups, including members of the public, the arts community, a range of public agencies and Arts Council staff. The formal research programme will be accompanied by a wider public debate, giving everyone the opportunity to participate through regional roadshows and an online discussion forum.

How will it work?
The first stage of the inquiry will comprise up to 24 discussion groups with members of the public across the country. Participants will be selected to reflect the diversity of the population and a wide range of interests, including those who have no engagement with the kind of artistic activity currently funded by the Arts Council and those whose voices are seldom heard. The discussion groups will be designed to provide an overview of experiences and attitudes to the arts and to highlight any differences among particular segments of the population. The second stage of the inquiry will build on these findings and will explore emerging issues in

1 For more information on our long-term challenges see Public engagement with the arts: our strategic challenges, Arts Council England 2006
greater detail with key subgroups such as those not currently engaged with the arts, members of minority ethnic groups, children and young people and rural communities.

Research among the arts community will form the third stage of the inquiry, likely to involve one-to-one interviews, group sessions and participative events with artists, producers and arts administrators. In the fourth stage we will conduct qualitative research with representatives of key stakeholder organisations. At appropriate points in the process we will access the knowledge, insights and opinions of Arts Council staff through workshops around the organisation.

If appropriate, the final stage of the inquiry may comprise a large-scale event – or a number of smaller events in different regions – where we bring our stakeholders together to identify common perceptions of value, explore tensions in greater depth and test out concepts of balance and trade-off.

Much of the inquiry will be based on deliberation, so that participants are provided with relevant information and evidence from a wide range of perspectives and given time to explore and debate the issues before coming to a reasoned opinion. Methodologies are likely to include citizen’s juries (where a small group of people cross-examine ‘witnesses’ or experts, and present recommendations to the convening body), and deliberative polling (where a larger group of people is sent briefing material in advance of a meeting in which they engage in dialogue and debate with experts, and opinions are measured in pre- and post-deliberation polls)\(^2\).

The research process itself should create value. The exchange of information and ideas in open discussion provides the opportunity for participants to widen their perspectives and opinions and develop a deeper involvement in and responsibility for the public life of this country. As with any successful inquiry, participants should feel that they have gained something personally and collectively as a result of the experience.

\(^2\) See the Opinion Leader Research pamphlet *Britain Speaks: Effective public engagement and better decision-making* for a useful overview of the range of deliberative techniques currently in use
For those that are not part of the sample for the formal research programme there will be opportunities to participate in the wider public debate, primarily through the online discussion forum. While entries to the forum will not form part of the robust evidence base, the content and nature of the debate will contribute to our understanding of key issues and concerns.

3 What is the scope?
It is important to manage expectations of the art debate – to be as clear about what the exercise is not designed to do, and will not achieve, as we are about the expected benefits. Firstly, the inquiry is a programme of robust research and wide-ranging debate, not an advocacy initiative. Like any other organisation, advocacy is an important part of the Arts Council’s operations. When value is created as a result of our work and the work of the individuals and organisations we fund, it is vital that we celebrate and communicate that achievement. However, the public value inquiry is a separate activity, designed to improve our understanding of what value looks like in the first place through impartial and rigorous analysis.

The arts debate is the Arts Council’s public value inquiry and not an attempt to speak for the arts as a whole. The inquiry will take a broad view of the arts, and will seek to understand how people experience and value a wide range of arts activities, including those that are currently outside the scope of public funding. However, this is to better understand the Arts Council’s role in a rich and complex ecology and to ensure that our future horizons are not limited by the considerations of the present.

The inquiry will not calculate the total value – public or otherwise – generated by the Arts Council and the organisations and individuals we fund. It is not a public ballot on the core purpose of the Arts Council, or an attempt to seek endorsement for our current activities and approach. It is not a vote on the art that should or should not be supported with public money.

We are not expecting to generate consensus among our stakeholders on what they value. In fact, the inquiry will give us greater understanding of the differences between the priorities and preferences of our stakeholder groups. If there is consensus on what is valued, we will find it, and if not we will have greater knowledge of where difference exists and what the nature of that difference is. For the Arts Council the inquiry is the start of a new and more robust approach to
negotiating value – to learning how different decisions and actions impact on different stakeholders in different ways.

Finally, the arts debate is not a one-off exercise. Perceptions of what is valuable will change over time and we must track and respond to the changing needs and priorities of our stakeholders. This initial phase is the beginning of a continuing process that will lie at the heart of a changing Arts Council – outward-looking, permeable, responsive and transparent, and ready to lead the debate about our own value and relevance.

4 What will the arts debate change?
How will we put the knowledge gained through the arts debate to use, and how do we expect things to be different for the Arts Council and our stakeholders as a result?

In the first instance we will have stimulated a new and rich dialogue with our stakeholders, including the public, resulting in a revitalised relationship based on a more informed understanding of our values, objectives and operation. We also expect to see a new energy and confidence inside the Arts Council, born of a revitalised commitment to serving all our stakeholders to the best of our ability and with a clearer public mandate to carry out our work.

The arts debate will generate fresh insights into the opportunities and challenges of increasing public engagement with the arts in this country. The arts community will be able to share in an expanded pool of knowledge about how to understand and measure the value of different kinds of arts experiences; this, in turn, should contribute to strategies for attracting new audiences and new participants in artistic activities. The arts debate will contribute to shared understanding of what it means for artists and arts organisations that receive public money to connect with, shape and respond to public preferences, and how this should inform Arts Council decisions.

The results of the inquiry will provide a foundation on which to start developing a new value framework for the Arts Council – a framework that sets out how we will deliver value to our stakeholders through accomplishing our mission. Developing and applying a framework of this nature is a three- to five-year programme of work, and we anticipate that the first phase of the arts debate will identify priority areas for further investigation.
In the long run our value framework will drive all of our policies and decisions, so the arts debate has the potential to produce a profound shift in the way the Arts Council operates. The arts debate will help ensure that the public voice more fully informs public investment decisions in the arts, and if in-depth dialogue and thorough analysis reveal the need for change then we are committed to making that happen. We will take care to manage expectations around the speed at which change can occur, given our current commitments to a wide range of long-standing relationships, networks and systems. However, we do want this process to generate knowledge that will make a long-term difference to the public funding of the arts in England, and to the way in which the Arts Council is perceived as a funder and supporter of arts.

5 How is the arts debate managed?
Overall responsibility for the arts debate lies with the project board, comprising Peter Hewitt (Chief Executive, Arts Council England), Andrew Whyte (Executive Director of Communications) and Catherine Bunting (Director of Research). Day-to-day management of the inquiry is by a core delivery team based within the Arts Council’s research department.

A broader support structure is also in place, comprising:
- internal project group – a group of seven staff from across the Arts Council support the delivery of the inquiry and act as internal champions
- Council reference group – the chief executive, executive director of communications and three members of our national Council support the strategic development of the inquiry
- external advisory panel – a group of external experts provide independent advice and ensure that the inquiry is impartial and robust

We are also grateful to a range of contributors who have helped shape the development of the inquiry – see Appendix for further details.

6 How can I get involved?
To learn more about the arts debate and to find out how you can get involved, see www.artscouncil.org.uk/artsdebate
Appendix
We would like to extend our thanks to a number of critical friends who have generously given up their time to comment on earlier versions of this paper. Their insight has challenged our assumptions and sharpened our thinking. We are particularly grateful to:

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