

# OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALIGNMENT: Arts and cultural organisations and public sector commissioning

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**Arts and cultural organisations—charities, social enterprises, for-profit organisations, museums and libraries—play a valuable role in addressing social challenges and delivering public services. The Cultural Commissioning Programme is a three year programme funded by Arts Council England to support the arts and cultural sector to collaborate with commissioners in the changing public service landscape. The programme is underpinned by this first research phase.**

## Scope of the research

Public sector commissioning aims to ensure that the services required by people with a specific need or in a particular area are available and designed to suit them. This research, conducted by NPC, maps the arts and cultural sector's experiences of public sector commissioning to date, examines the public service commissioning landscape and highlights opportunities for relationships between the sector and commissioners to be strengthened in the future. The focus is wider than how arts and cultural organisations can secure contracts and funding, considering also the role that arts and cultural activities can play in the design of effective public services.

By examining both provider and commissioner perspectives, this research identifies areas where the interests of arts and cultural organisations match those of commissioners. The report contains messages not only for arts and cultural organisations and commissioners, but also for organisations which can influence the way commissioning works such as ministers and civil servants, elected local officials and Arts Council England.

## The current picture

- Over 8,500 charitable arts and cultural organisations in England—6% of all registered charities—represent 8% of the voluntary sector's total income.
- A third of arts and cultural organisations' income comes from public sources
- Arts and cultural organisations which succeeded in securing contracts won on average one or two contracts a year and 85% surveyed said that all or some of their contracts were arts-specific briefs.
- The proportion of arts and cultural organisations receiving public funding is comparable to the voluntary sector as a whole by numbers—however they secure a third less in terms of contract value than the rest of the sector.

## Value of arts and cultural activities

**Arts and cultural interventions are asset based: working with individuals' strengths and abilities.**

Evidence indicates that arts and cultural activities can offer a strong—and in some cases specific—contribution to achieving social outcomes. Arts and cultural organisations contribute to the design of effective services by helping people articulate their needs, and can also be effective in engaging and sustaining participants over a programme of activity. Arts and cultural activities respond to social problems, ranging from the care of older people to preventing crime. There is, however, a need for arts and cultural organisations to explain how their activity improves outcomes, and to highlight the need for interventions to be of high quality if they are to achieve required outcomes.

## Methodology

The first phase involved a literature review, an online survey for arts and cultural organisations, data analysis and interviews with a range of organisations and commissioners.

Based on this, three areas where there is strong alignment between arts and cultural organisations and public sector commissioners were identified for in-depth research.

Phase two involved further interviews and desk-based research. The information has been collated into three 'baselines' detailing the commissioning situation in each of the focus areas.

## The commissioner perspective

The delivery of public services is undergoing significant changes. Commissioners are working with a host of challenges: shrinking funds, rising need, new and complex payment structures, integrated commissioning models, and changes in regulation.

Commissioners are therefore operating within constrained environments—lacking the freedom or confidence to innovate and pilot new approaches.

***‘I have seen arts and cultural activities deliver better outcomes than some medically focused therapies’***

Sue Gallagher  
Non-executive Director  
NHS Lambeth

However, commissioners who have seen the value of arts and cultural activities can be enthusiastic champions, and some aspects of the current commissioning context are potentially supportive to arts and cultural commissioning, for example the Social Value Act. Providers need to be seen as credible, effective organisations which understand the area in which they are hoping to work. Commissioners can play their role by making processes and opportunities as transparent and accessible as possible.

***‘Creative arts should be part of a jigsaw of possibilities for people’***

Ian Smith  
Commissioning Manager  
Kirklees Council

## Assessing the potential of commissioning

Public sector commissioning is not appropriate for the whole arts and cultural sector. Engaging in commissioning can benefit the organisations involved but may also require compromise. While flexibility and working in partnership can help providers to successfully secure commissioned work, lack of information about opportunities and poor relationships with commissioners may frustrate efforts. Significant investment of time is required, with no guarantee of success.

### Is commissioning appropriate for you?

Questions to consider

#### Mission

- Do you need public funding to deliver your mission?
- Is your mission aligned with the priorities of commissioners?
- Is there buy-in within the organisation (board members and staff)?

#### Capacity

- Do you have the resources to pursue the opportunity without detracting from your mission?
- If successful, do you have the capacity to deliver the service?
- Do you have a clear business model, including unit costs of delivery?

#### The opportunity

- Are there opportunities for you to solve commissioner problems?
- Do you have access to commissioners to tell them about your service? Do you know the right people?
- Are commissioners prepared to pay a fair price on fair terms for your service?

#### Chances of success

- Can you win the contract alone, or would you need to find a partner?
- If so, do you know who would be the most appropriate partner for your needs?
- What type of tender (eg, how competitive) do you have the capacity to win?
- Can you evidence your outcomes in the way that commissioners expect?

#### Yes to most questions?

Some adaptation may be necessary, but worth engaging with commissioning.

#### No to most questions?

Commissioning unlikely to be the right approach for you.

## Measuring social value

Measuring the social value that activities deliver is crucial as commissioners have to justify their investments and demonstrate that the money spent gets results. Evidencing social value requires two distinct elements:

<p><b>Service evaluation</b></p> <p>Useful for learning or assessing success of intervention. Demonstrates progress and achievement of outcomes.</p>	<p><b>Research evidence</b></p> <p>Evidence that a type of intervention has an impact on a social outcome (especially over the longer term).</p>
<p>These two elements can overlap: rigorous service evaluation can add to the body of research evidence.</p>	

The level of evidence required varies by commissioner, but most arts and cultural organisations will need to draw on their own service evaluation to provide a track record for commissioners and also use robust research based on higher standards of evidence to demonstrate that the approach has been proved effective. Some arts and cultural organisations assess and evidence their work through a range of methods: tracking basic monitoring data, collecting participant feedback, collating case studies, making before and after assessments—sometimes through use of standardised tools—and in some instances following up over the long term.

Many of the evidence challenges organisations face are not unique to the sector. Some organisations have a defined outcomes framework to help select appropriate impact measurement practices. Commissioners need to ensure that the evidence standards they require of organisations are proportionate to the size of the contract and the outcomes sought. There are opportunities for commissioners to work with the arts and cultural sector to develop the right measures.

**70% of survey respondents placed *being able to evidence* among their top three success factors for securing public funding.**

Our mapping identified three focus areas—older people, mental health and well-being, and place-based commissioning—where significant opportunities for arts and cultural commissioning exist. For each we have explored the policy environment, level of commissioner interest, provider potential to add value, and the ability to evidence. Full details can be found in Appendix A of the full report.

## Key messages for providers

**You can be involved in delivering public services if you explain your work in a way which resonates with commissioners.**

- Be bold in articulating the value of your work and use the strengths of arts and cultural approaches—that they are emotionally and intellectually engaging—to help commissioners see the value of the work.
- Talk the language of social outcomes, not arts and culture, and tell commissioners how you can help solve their problem—this may require some compromise of language and terminology.
- Understand the constraints—for example budgets and legal obligations—under which commissioners operate. Showing that you recognise these will help make you a credible partner to influence decisions.
- Provide commissioners with evidence of your reach and what you can achieve: how your work helps meet the outcomes commissioners seek. Draw on published research as well as your own evidence.
- Form relationships with commissioners where possible so that you can get involved with the commissioning process at an early stage, and help to design services.
- Partner with others to complement what you can offer, including organisations outside the arts and cultural sector. Partnerships can be hugely valuable but are time-consuming to establish and maintain.
- Commissioning may not suit every organisation, so be wary of becoming involved if you believe pursuing a commissioning process will derail your mission or be too cumbersome for your organisational capacity.

## Key messages for commissioners

**Arts and cultural organisations can help solve difficult problems, however they may not fit neatly into standard commissioning structures. If you can work with these organisations with a degree of flexibility, you'll be able to get more out of the relationship.**

- The work of arts and cultural organisations is relevant across a range of outcomes and variety of beneficiaries—there are lots of areas where they could be valuable partners.
- You may find arts and cultural organisations can offer value in designing as well as delivering services—both through existing knowledge of individual and community needs, and through using creative approaches to help understand and articulate those needs.
- The procurement process for commissioning services needs to be realistic. Arts and cultural organisations may not be of a size or scale that can meet the requirements of complex tendering processes: bureaucratic commissioning processes could exclude organisations offering useful approaches.
- Evidence standards need to be proportionate and realistic, recognising that prevention is difficult to measure.
- You are right to demand evidence that commissioned work delivers on priority outcomes, but where possible you should be open to dialogue about appropriate measurement before contract specifications are finalised. The challenges here are often not unique to the artistic or cultural intervention, but associated with the challenges of working with a specific beneficiary group.

## Key messages for strategic influencers

- Many arts and cultural organisations depend heavily on arts-specific funding. As this reduces, the core capacity of organisations in the sector is at risk. Given the level of arts and cultural work which is orientated to social outcomes, policymakers should be concerned about this loss of capacity.
- The reality of budget cuts and rising needs gives commissioners a strong incentive to consider new solutions to difficult problems. Strategic leadership is needed to support commissioning and procurement professionals to engage with creative commissioning options while assessing and managing risks appropriately.
- The relatively low take-up amongst commissioners of arts and cultural activities to deliver social outcomes illustrates a failure to grasp the benefits that arts and cultural organisations can bring.

For **Arts Council England** we have these recommendations:

- The collective voice of arts and cultural organisations is weak. Investing in the policy capacity of organisations will help them to articulate their role in society.
- Arts and cultural organisations will need ongoing training and support to position themselves to take advantage of commissioning opportunities—beyond the lifetime and scope of the Cultural Commissioning Programme.
- Evidence of what works is scattered and there are gaps. A central point of information, ideally accessible via Arts Council England, would help organisations to find the evidence they need to make their case. Funding of research would also help to fill gaps where needed.

These findings will inform the further strands of the Cultural Commissioning Programme's work, including advice, networking activities, training events and the collation of case studies.

Delivery of the Cultural Commissioning Programme is led by NCVO, working in partnership with NPC (New Philanthropy Capital) and NEF (New Economics Foundation), with contribution from Mission Models Money (MMM) in the programme set-up and research. The work of the programme is steered by an advisory group, chaired by Lord Bichard.

For more information about the programme, please visit: [www.ncvo.org/CCProg](http://www.ncvo.org/CCProg).