



ACE in a hole?  
An alternative cultural  
strategy for England

January 2020

This paper was triggered by Robert Hewison's provocative critique, published in *Arts Professional* on 3rd October, 2019, of Arts Council England's consultation document *Shaping the Next Ten Years*, which set out a first draft of that organisation's priorities for the coming decade. The article is available at:

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Four of us who read it – John Holden, John Kieffer, John Newbiggin and Shelagh Wright (the members of the 'ThreeJohnsandShelagh' collective) – felt it constituted a call to action.

In discussion with Robert Hewison we concluded that the most positive way we could do that was to sketch an alternative to *Shaping the Next Ten Years*, or at least suggest a different starting point for a cultural strategy that might provide a more robust foundation at a time when our country is deeply divided and the arts, by any definition, are under pressure.

That is why we've called it "ACE in a hole?".

The reference to England in the title is because Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have devolved cultural jurisdictions.

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# Introduction

**Arts Council England (ACE) is about to implement a new 10-year strategy. But to judge from the consultation document on which the new strategy is based, *Shaping the next ten years*, it is unlikely to solve the crises facing the cultural sector in terms of engagement, education and funding.**

**Vague generalisations and arcane art-speak about “cultural communities”, “a creative and cultural country”, “ambition and quality”, “inclusivity and relevance”, “dynamism and environmental sustainability” simply don’t cut it. They don’t connect with most people. By Arts Council England’s own admission, despite ten years of “Great Art and Culture for Everyone”, these remain the relatively exclusive reserve of a minority.**

**In spite of a decade of lobbying government, arts education is disappearing from the curriculum for a rising generation of young people. This may not yet amount to a crisis, but it certainly calls for a more fundamental appraisal of ACE’s purpose and methodology than is on offer in *Shaping the next ten years*.**

**Rather than proposing uncontroversial “outcomes”, it would be better to start with asserting – or re-asserting – some core principles.**

**Here are some suggestions . . .**

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# Principles

## 01 Justice

**The current system of cultural funding is deeply unjust. It continues to favour a section of the population that by and large already enjoys the arts and culture, thanks to advantages of money, education and geographic location. But to be able to explore one's own creativity and engage critically with the creativity of others should be a basic right in any civilised society.**

**Education, and specifically arts education, is the gateway to making that right a reality, but current government policy is deliberately erecting barriers to arts and cultural education, and so is denying access to the arts. ACE urgently needs to call out the Department for Education for its appalling failures in this area. It should do so in the name of justice.**

“Diversity” is only the latest term to have been exhausted in the search for a solution to the problem that a large proportion of the population feels that the arts and culture do not speak to, still less, for, them. In the United Kingdom, culture – that is, the customs, celebrations, creative acts and performances through which individuals make sense of their lives – is already diverse. Most people lead fulfilling cultural lives that do not depend on outdated official definitions of culture.

That does not mean that ACE has to commit its limited funds to every form of cultural expression, but justice demands that its priorities should start from where people are at, not where historical baggage and vested interests happen to be most powerful. Entitlement to culture should not be restricted to the entitled.

Justice should be the principle that governs the distribution of resources and access. If it were, the public would be given a voice in the decisions that affect their cultural lives through, for example, citizens' juries or assemblies. Public participation should not be limited to being potential audience members or one of the “outreached to”.

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The public, a.k.a. “the people formerly known as the audience”, should be given a voice in the decisions that affect their cultural life.

A further twist to the story is that while the government boasts about the economic contribution of the creative industries, it fails to acknowledge the blindingly obvious fact that enjoyment of and engagement in the arts is the essential pathway for individuals to discover and develop their particular talent.

**Justice must be the first, and core, principle, because it governs the implementation of all the others. Unless and until there is a just distribution of investment and resources, publicly-funded arts and culture will continue to be seen as the property of the privileged. ACE will be seen as an instrument of exclusion, not the enabler of inclusion that it wants to be.**

## O2. Trust

**In a system totally ensnared in a byzantine maze of targets, metrics, monitoring and evaluations, trust has been lost: trust between government and ACE, between ACE and the organisations and individuals it serves, and – albeit more tricky – trust between the arts establishment and the people. The creative process needs room to breathe.**

Trust should form the relationship between the government and ACE, and between ACE and those it funds. Trust must also be built among, between and within cultural organisations. It is a truism that detailed monitoring and interference in people’s work destroys trust and militates against real experimentation and risk-taking.

To work creatively, individuals and organisations need to feel that they are controlling their own destiny, able to work with imagination, not just competence, and that what they are doing has a purpose. When those three criteria are aligned, trust flourishes.

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Cultural organisations must regain their autonomy by earning it – and that includes ACE itself. A funding environment based on trust would restore ACE’s legitimacy, whereas at present it is no more than a go-between for government and the funded – a “cash machine with a complicated PIN number”, as one former Arts Council chairman has described it.

**The power relationship between ACE and cultural organisations needs to be reversed. ACE exists to serve its “clients” – that used to be the favoured terminology. But now the recipients of funding are more likely to feel that their core purpose is to fulfil targets set by ACE. Relationships based on mutual trust would help ACE to be what it says it wants to be – an advocate for the arts, not an auditor of the arts.**

### **03.Accountability**

**Trust is not a substitute for accountability, particularly where public funding is concerned. But the two are not mutually exclusive. Accountability can be the reciprocal of trust where the common factor is transparency and clarity of purpose. Ultimately, accountability should not be to the government or ACE, but to the public that is the source of funding. Without that public accountability, “art” becomes what Arts Council England says it is: a circular and self-fulfilling definition that leaves the majority of people on the outside. In a mature democracy alive with energetic new thinking and technologies that are revolutionising ideas about governance, responsiveness and accountability, the arts should be leading change, not clinging to out-of-date and often elitist decision-making structures.**

Those responsible for ACE’s judgments need expertise in their field. ACE needs to rebuild the arts experience that it has lost, and ACE’s decision-making processes should be contemporary, clear and open. Decisions on public funding require a level of competence on the part of the decision-takers, and of those subject to those decisions.

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**ACE has a duty to ensure that the organisations that it supports understand the environment in which they operate, and that they employ competent business managers. It is not heretical to suggest that arts organisations can learn from business without placing profit above purpose. For social accountability to flourish, ACE needs to build stronger structures for access to information; provide data in accessible formats as well as access to its officials so that civil-society groups, and others outside “the arts” can easily and effectively engage with its agenda, platforms, projects and programmes.**

## **04.Risk**

**Creativity depends on risk. Risk presupposes occasional failure; and, as a swathe of professional disciplines, from engineering to bio-technology and even video-games-development attest, failure is often a positive. It is work in progress. Throughout history artists have been the foremost champions of that positive view of experimentation. ACE must be able to embrace it with confidence.**

To hide behind old tropes about politicians and bureaucrats being averse to risk is not good enough – after all, ACE is supposed to be independent from government. Other areas, such as defence procurement and the National Health Service provide copious examples of how to use a wide variety of standards in measuring acceptable levels of risk – boldly embracing creative risk, while avoiding obvious operating risks. Without risk, a dead culture will extinguish the spark of creativity whose origins are by definition unknowable.

Neither failure nor success are secure judgments when it comes to the arts, where long term appreciation can reverse immediate rejection (think of Van Gogh). As the Hollywood screenwriter William Goldman once said of the film industry, “nobody knows anything.” And don’t forget Georges Braque: “the purpose of art is to disturb.” ACE needs the confidence to embrace these truths.

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Instead of judging cultural organisations by using vague and relativistic terms such as “excellence”, ACE should make its assessments in terms of the talent that has been demonstrated, and the potential that it shows. By trusting an organisation or an individual’s sense of purpose, the risk it takes in supporting them will be rewarded by a renewed confidence on the part of those to whom they commit. Confidence encourages creativity, as well as trust.

**A creative nation is not a nation of professional artists, but a nation of people who make culture for themselves; a cultural democracy in action.**

## Practice

Are these principles helpful? And can they provide the underpinning for practical policies? There are many examples from across the country and around the world, in the arts sector and beyond it, to learn from. To bring them into focus, here are some questions that committed people and Arts Council England should consider.

- **How to pursue justice?** What might real “cultural justice” look like? Should it enshrine rights for all, for children, for regions, for marginalised groups? Or could it take a leaf from social movements and the legal system and formally integrate citizens’ juries into the process of developing strategy and distributing resources?
- **How to start from where people are?** How can people be engaged, and feel engaged, in discussions about priorities, and making decisions about where the money goes? How do people identify with or value the cultural life of their community? Where are the “known unknowns” and the “unknown unknowns” in the way most people think about the arts and culture? What is the language that works? What can be learnt from media, retail and service organisations about engaging people and utilising data to build accurate pictures of habits, preferences, prejudices and blind spots?
- **How to reward and encourage arts organisations that co-operate with each other?** How can local, regional and national cultural resources be



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marshalled in a way that puts co-operation and competition in a healthy and creative balance? Could national strategy be better integrated with local strategies? How can we get away from a funding environment that obliges neighbouring arts organisations to compete with each other for funds rather than incentivising them to collaborate?

- **How to nurture new talent, and feed the roots?** ACE needs to spend more money on the future and less on the past. What would really happen if the big beasts of culture were left to take more responsibility for themselves, so that time and resources could be targeted on those who can't fend for themselves and those communities that feel ignored, and where a little support might go a very long way?
- **What about the Department for Education?** Who will take some responsibility for a cheated generation? Can the Department for Education be shamed into action? Would international comparisons help that process? Look at Finland<sup>1</sup>. Can parents be mobilised more effectively? Or should arts organisations just bite the bullet and divert most of their resources to work with schools, helping them compensate for the irresponsibility of the DfE?
- **How to help ACE rebuild confidence in, and be able to explain, its judgements about the arts and culture?** Would that involve finding new ways of including the public in the mix? There are many ways of distributing money to fund the arts, including peer decisions, crowdfunding, matchfunding, traditional grant applications, citizens' juries, devolving decisions to community groups or local government. Which of these works best in what circumstances? Look at the academic papers, such as Jason Potts on random funding<sup>2</sup>, and at the experience of others, such as London's City Hall and community funding<sup>3</sup>; the Wellcome Trust trusting its grant recipients<sup>4</sup>; and the Jack Petchey Foundation<sup>5</sup>.
- **How to learn from what is happening in other places?** Look at Cultura Viva in Barcelona<sup>6</sup> or Creative Scotland<sup>7</sup> or the municipalist movements or the Rawa Fund in Palestine<sup>8</sup>, or the Indonesia Creative Cities Network<sup>9</sup>.
- **How to make "trust" real and reduce the demands for reporting?** Are there funding models from other countries or other sectors that might help frame new methods of accountability or good practice? Would voluntary

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codes of conduct work? Digital technology offers ever more sophisticated ways of gauging satisfaction and soliciting feedback – how can we make the arts and cultural sector a pioneer in that space rather than a laggard?

**These are just some of the questions that not just Arts Council England, but everyone needs to consider.**

Try looking at:

1. Finland: <https://minedu.fi/en/basic-education-in-arts>.
2. Jason Potts on random funding: <https://meanjin.com.au/essays/arts-funding-the-random-alternative/>
3. London City Hall: <https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/civil-society/grants-and-funding>
4. Wellcome Trust:  
[https://wellcome.ac.uk/funding?gclid=CjwKCAiAob3vBRAUEiwAlbs5TkxwCmPUZnr0Fb\\_s4VMYQupykh-cosy4FKm51SADgAk9FqF-8nNyvxoCpu4QAvD\\_BwE](https://wellcome.ac.uk/funding?gclid=CjwKCAiAob3vBRAUEiwAlbs5TkxwCmPUZnr0Fb_s4VMYQupykh-cosy4FKm51SADgAk9FqF-8nNyvxoCpu4QAvD_BwE)
5. Jack Petchey Foundation: ☺ <https://www.jackpetcheyfoundation.org.uk/>
6. Cultura Viva, Barcelona: <http://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/culturaviva/en/>
7. Creative Scotland <https://www.creativescotland.com>
8. Rawa Fund Palestine <https://rawafund.org>
9. Indonesia Creative Cities Network: <https://creativecitysouth.org>

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# Conclusion

Culture is not a commodity, a privilege or a qualification. Together with the need for public order, public health and democratic governance, it is an essential part of the public realm – that shared space which allows commercial interests, governments, charities, pressure groups, and private individuals to interact. The arts and culture offer languages in which ideas, images and values that are disputed in the public realm can be resolved – or at least chewed over. When so much of the public life of the country feels in a state of flux, ACE is right to set itself the goal of “shaping the next ten years”. This document is offered as a way to match that big ambition.

**Shelagh Wright, John Newbiggin, John Kieffer, John Holden and Robert Hewison**

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John Kieffer is currently part of the core team for Heart n Soul at the Hub, a two year research project at the Wellcome Collection.

John Holden is a writer, consultant, and cultural policy commentator. His publications include *The Ecology of Culture*, *Capturing Cultural Value*, and *Influence and Attraction*.

Robert Hewison is a cultural historian. Among his publications are *Ruskin and his Contemporaries*, and *Cultural Capital: The Rise and Fall of Creative Britain*.