

Visual Arts Development Scoping

Executive Summary of the Findings

Many of those interviewed were delighted that the Arts Council was asking for their views and agreed that a balance between 'top down' and 'bottom up' approaches needed to be found when looking to solutions to the issues.

The consultants firmly recommend that whatever is put in place as a result of this work should not provide the answers to arts organisations, but present opportunities which require in partnership working.

All findings represent the perceptions, attitudes and beliefs of the arts organisations interviewed and surveyed.

Key Areas of Similarity across the three sub-regions

The visual arts organisations

Most are small scale with major issues around capacity. There are clearly hubs of activity, partly around the large institutions and cities, but also around where artists live. There are relatively few RFOs compared to other sectors and many audiences are not in the catchment of an RFO.

The people working in the sector

Many staff are part-time and work well beyond their contracted hours. Many work in more than one place or wear more than one 'hat' (e.g. being both a gallery curator and artist).

Talented individuals

The sector houses some strong talent and specialists in a variety of areas. However, there are few ways of disseminating skills, knowledge and know-how.

A good level of understanding of the value of partnership working

There is a strong understanding of the value of partnership working, although sometimes capacity issues get in the way of fruitful partnerships actually coming about.

A concern about artists at mid-career stage

There was a clear concern about the loss of artists to the region at mid-career stage.

Critical debate

There was agreement that the sector needs more opportunity to discuss questions around quality, critical debate and practice. Often artists are too close to their critique peers leading to a lack of honesty in critiquing. There is very little written critical appraisal.

Belief in the strength of grass roots activity

From all areas, was a belief that the unorthodox and artist-led projects need more recognition and support.

The capacity issue

The smaller organisations in particular have major issues in terms of capacity, particularly time. Some back filling could be useful here, enabling leaders of organisations to get away from their desks and explore new ways of working.

Concern about lack of access to understanding about the changes within Children and Young People's Services

Many organisations want to get to grips with the changes in order to better engage with CYPS.

A desire to create more communities of interest

The sub-regions were not felt to be a particularly useful way of looking at the region by most interviewed. People are more interested in communities of interest or in audience catchment areas.

Key Areas of Difference across the Region

City Vs Rural

There is certainly evidence of a rural / city divide. Issues in each area are different and the rural catchments tend to be ignored by the city organisations. Rural areas often feel that audiences do not believe that excellence can be found locally and feel that funders prioritise the cities.

Greater issues around critical debate where there is no university

Localities without universities feel unable to engage as fully in critical debate as they would wish. In the localities with universities, organisations are much more confident in this area.

A level of unhealthy competition causing issues for effective partnerships

There is certainly unhealthy competition. There are feelings that Cornwall has had too much attention in recent years and that this has caused issues for Devon-based organisations, Gloucestershire organisations on the whole do not like to look to Bristol for partnerships, preferring to look towards Swindon and Wales. Bristol and Bath rarely cooperate. There is a strong feeling that the South West Profile is dominated by Bristol and Cornwall.

A patchy network for communications between Visual Arts Organisations

The communications network is patchy. While there are some fantastically good examples of grass roots communication and some strong networks, these are only in some areas. A mapping of networks (including open studios) would be useful, as would some investigation into a process for organisations to self-analyse and group themselves into useful networks.

The Three Key Areas explored by the Research

1. Audience Development

This was the area in which most people felt they were least experienced.

Tactical not Strategic

Across the region there are plenty of examples of short term, tactical marketing, but few examples of longer term, strategic marketing. It is clear that the sector as a whole needs to examine ways of becoming more strategic in its dealings with audiences and potential audiences. Across the region, many organisations are collecting data but few are using it in order to develop audiences. Some organisations commented that there was learning to be taken from the South West Museums Hub Renaissance in the Regions programme.

Little debate around commissioning and audience development

All too often curatorial staff had little knowledge or understanding of audiences. There continues an assumption from curatorial staff that popular always equates to populist.

Few audience development specialists

Few but the largest organisations have marketing or audience development specialists on their teams. Issues here are around marketing skills needs but even more importantly they are about lack of confidence.

Very low usage of data

While a number of organisations do collect audience data, very few actually use it for business planning and even less use it to develop audiences. In addition, there is no agreed methodology for collecting audience data so it is very difficult to provide reliable benchmarks across organisations.

Lack of audience data for public art

Some commented that while public art attracts new audiences, data is not available and activity is not plugged into the regional infrastructure.

Difficulties communicating the vision to various audiences with various levels of understanding and engagement

Many organisations find it hard to communicate their vision effectively to the public. This is difficult; how do you describe a visual experience using language and appealing to people at a variety of entry points? Organisations want to enable ladders of opportunity for audiences.

A need to widen the net in terms of audiences

A number of local authorities felt that visual arts organisations often focus on their own; artists and arts professionals as their primary audience. They were concerned as to how the sector widens this out.

A need for the visual arts to lobby the tourism sector

There is a belief that the visual arts are not high enough on the tourist agenda and that there is an over-emphasis on business on the South West's profile.

A need for a co-ordinated approach to marketing

There was a strong desire to establish a co-ordinated approach to marketing the sector with aggregated communications.

An interest in monitoring the online audience

Tracking and monitoring an online audience is a relatively new issue, which the visual arts sector feels it needs to grasp.

2. Professional Development

This was the area in which most people had the most to say.

A 'glass ceiling'

On the whole people felt that start up provision was strong, but there were issues over where to go next in a career in the Visual Arts in the South West. People wanted to know who was responsible for signposting opportunities, what to do when they get stuck and where they should go to identify skills gaps. Individuals are often isolated by location or size of team and there is little upward promotion opportunity. This can quell ambition.

Strong skills in the Visual Arts but often isolated

There was agreement that across the sector there are some highly developed skills across business development, project management and curatorial practice. However, these skills are rarely shared.

Some find it hard to describe their training needs

People told the consultants that they 'didn't know what they didn't know'.

A lack of sector specific skills in Local Authorities

While some local authority officers are specialist in the visual arts, many are intimidated by it.

A tailored approach to professional development

The primary interest was in some form of mentoring or tailored support; people tended to feel that many training courses were not tailored enough for specific needs. There was agreement that there were many issues of confidence around audience development in particular and that a mentoring approach could help increase levels of confidence. Certainly lack of confidence is an issue here and because of this many get stuck in their comfort zone.

Many felt that a mentoring approach (either one to one or through learning sets or a combination of these) should focus on achieving exemplary individuals rather than exemplary organisations. Many felt that a healthy region is one that focuses on individuals who can share their learning with others.

One-stop shop / brokerage for professional development

It was also clear that, while there are plenty of training opportunities in many areas, sifting these to find the right one for your staff is a laborious and difficult process. Some kind of 'one-stop shop' / brokerage where you can find out about all the professional development opportunities available and receive recommendations from people who have attended could really help here.

It is not only about business skills; it's also about creative practice

While many were happy with the training supplied by Arts Matrix, some commented that this training is strong on business skills only.

An audience focus is not always prevailing

The consultants also noted a prevailing attitude from curators that audience development is a function of the organisation that is separate to curating an exhibition. Professional development needs to focus on the needs of curators and artists to understand their audience and their needs.

Curators isolated – but not so much as marketing staff

Curatorial issues were mainly around opportunities to see more work and to discuss work and critical practice – locally, nationally and internationally. However, curatorial peer support was seen as stronger than audience development peer support. There was strong demand for the South West's Curatorial Network.

Specialist delivery

There was strong feedback that there is little training or support available for those wanting to pursue a career in specialist areas such as arts and health, art in the public realm or digital/online work.

A lack of visual arts specific networking opportunities

Across the board was a feeling that there is a lack of sector specific networking opportunities although some sharing via informal networks.

Sharing Best Practice

There was a strong need described to learn about best practice from one another. Best practice is not being disseminated well currently. A number talked about peer review as a way of enabling dissemination of and engagement in best practice

Learning from models of good practice within and outside the region

Many people felt that while there were some opportunities to share good practice within the region, that there was very little sharing beyond.

3. Advocacy

This was the area that many felt was most beyond their own individual control.

A need for more joint working across the Visual Arts Sector

There is a strong sense that joint working strengthens the sector profile.

Advocacy opportunities

Open Studio schemes are seen as a key advocacy opportunity.

Making the Case

There was a clear need described for the Visual Arts sector to make the social and economic case for their existence in order to persuade local authorities and other key potential stakeholders.

Increased PR needed

Many organisations commented on the general lack of media coverage of the visual arts in the region. Few curators in the region write for professional magazines and so represent the region.

Visual Art Champions needed

Many also felt that the Visual Arts in the region does not have any strong champions/advocates. A number of leaders of bigger institutions felt that they were not active enough on the (inter)national arts political stage.

More space required both to support artists and to aid visibility

There was also agreement that in the current economic climate, support for artists and arts organisations gaining access to disused spaces for low rent as exhibition or workspace, is an important area for development. The new Town Centre fund could be invaluable here, but this project could be a centre point for advocacy.

4. Other areas that consultees would like to see explored

Although the research did not focus on these areas, they came up in discussion often enough to clearly be important. This report recommends that more time be given to discussing these three areas:

- Supporting new business models (this of course affects all 3 areas focussed on in this report as well as others)
- Making sure artists voices are heard by the institutions and funders
- Developing creativity in the Education curriculum