

Towards a Turning Point Action Plan for the South West **Audiences South West**

Miranda Jacobs and Alicia Miller, Audiences South West

Introduction

This paper constitutes an informed but personal reflection on the research, *Visual Arts Development in the South West Scoping Study*, that was carried out by Audiences South West in the South West region in response to the roll-out of the *Turning Point* strategy. Having been project managers of the Bristol Visual Arts Consortium for its three years, we followed through aims and objectives of Bristol's visual arts development on a micro level that helped shape the current visual arts scoping research on a macro level. These are our own thoughts and comments on the findings from the research study and on what might happen next. We submit this paper to the Turning Point South West steering group for their consideration in the development of the *Turning Point Network*. We hope that our comments might be a helpful starting point for thinking about how the Network could be formed and on what key areas for development the research study highlighted. A strong network of support for visual arts organisations in the South West could substantially raise the bar of ambition and excellence in the region, widening audiences and supporting the sector's growth and development.

Background

In Spring, 2009 Audiences South West was enlisted by Arts Council England, South West to carry out a body of research on the potential development needs of the contemporary visual arts in the South West region in response to Arts Council England's Turning Point strategy, published in 2006. Turning Point defines key challenges for the Visual Arts Sector in the coming 10 years. The research commissioned by ACE SW asked artists and arts professionals across the region what was needed to help the sector meet these challenges. Three teams of researchers worked across the region to collect data; the sub-regions were broken down into the West of England (Gloucestershire, South Gloucestershire, Bristol, Bath and North East Somerset, Somerset) (this piece of research was carried out by us), the South (Bournemouth & Poole, Dorset, Wiltshire and Swindon) and the Peninsular (Devon, Torbay,

Plymouth and Cornwall). Having received and discussed the three individual research reports, we also authored an overview of the region based on these.

The research was conditioned by a previous project of Audiences South West, the Bristol Visual Arts Consortium (BVAC). BVAC was developed by Audiences South West, Arts Council England, South West and Bristol City Council and it ran for three years from 2005 – 2008. It was established to raise the profile of visual arts activity in Bristol and to develop better networks between organisations and encourage collaborative programming. Its aim was to build a sustainable joint working relationship across visual arts organisations in Bristol and other associated partners that would enhance networks and resources, enabling all parts of the visual arts ecology to play to its strengths and thrive. Through shared programming, knowledge, trust and better communication, this exchange sought to increase ambition and excellence of artistic practice throughout the Consortium as a whole. BVAC was instigated by ACESW in conversation with Bristol City Council and formed part of a broader ACESW strategy of building a ‘critical mass’ of visual arts activity in cities such as Bristol and Plymouth.

The Region as defined by the Research

The Visual Arts Development research sought specific feedback from arts professionals in the three sub-regions in relation to the areas of audience development, professional development and advocacy. This was compiled into the *Visual Arts Development in the South West Scoping Study*. The Study offers a picture of a region with a healthy preponderance of smaller organisations with the larger and usually better resourced organisations located primarily in urban hubs (Bristol, Plymouth, Bournemouth, Swindon) and with fewer RFOs throughout than other sectors and in other regions. 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). The sector houses a quantity of strong talent and specialists in a variety of areas. However, there are few ways of disseminating skills, knowledge and know-how. For both artists and arts professionals, there was a lack of opportunity for further progression and development at mid-career; many artists leave the region at this time, seeking wider exhibition opportunities and support. There is a strong need for quality critical debate throughout the region to support

the ongoing development of artists' practice. Artists are often too close to their critique peers leading to a lack of honesty in critiquing. And though there are a great deal of innovative and engaging 'grass-roots' projects generated by artist groups and independent curators, it needs to be nurtured and encouraged with practical support—seed funding, advice, marketing support.

Parameters of the Research

Both the BVAC project final evaluation and Turning Point identify the following three areas as key ones for development and support of the Visual Arts Sector:

- **Audience Development**

Turning Point outlines as a key ambition the need to '...widen and deepen engagement with the visual arts.' Yet a lack of strong and specialist expertise in audience development in visual arts organisations through the region was widely reported. All but the largest and better resourced organisations held such knowledge and there were few forums for discussion and exchanges of learning through which this expertise might be disseminated. Further, marketing and audience development is largely tactical and not strategic and while data on audiences is collected by organisations, it is rarely used in business planning or audience development. Further the relationship between programming and audience development was fragmented with curatorial staff often having little knowledge or understanding of audiences. Communications can also be problematic, with organisations struggling to describe what they do in ways that are both nuanced and accessible.

To grow audiences across the South West, and meet the ambition of *Turning Point*, organisations need support in gaining a better understanding of their audiences and the audience viewpoint, considering the role of commissioning and communications in engaging new audiences for their work. Organisations further need practical support in developing their skills and resources in marketing, data collection and audience development as well as forums for exchange and networking opportunities to share expertise. While most organisations identify audience development as a key strategic aim, few have the resources and staff to realize their objectives.

- **Professional Development**

This was the area about which the sector had the most to say. *Turning Point* addresses a range of issues relating to those working in the sector among which diversity, career development and leadership figure as significant threats. In the South West, professional development and mid-career stasis were repeatedly identified as significant concerns. A mid-career 'glass ceiling' was referenced as people struggled to figure out where to go next in the South West. Though professional development provision is strong through the region, many people felt that signposting was weak and it was difficult to know where to go to identify skills gaps. People told researchers that they 'didn't know what they didn't know.' There was a particular need expressed for more 'tailored' training and a 'one-stop shop' brokerage for professional development opportunities. People also felt that they could benefit from visual arts specific networking opportunities and better dissemination of existing expertise and best practice.

Artists had issues with their creative development, with ample training provision in business development but far fewer opportunities to develop their practice. Raising the level of critical debate was a frequently cited need for both artists, arts professionals and audiences, especially in areas without a college or university. Curators and artists also sought more chances to 'go and see' with space to discuss work and critical practice.

To support creative and professional development in the region, there needs to be coordination and brokerage to facilitate the identification of appropriate training. Further, opportunities to connect with other communities of interest in the region could help overcome the geographical barriers of space and time and improve professional and artistic networks. Improved partnership working between organisations also opens space for exchange and informal peer learning.

- **Advocacy for the Sector**

A need to make the social and economic case for the visual arts to local authorities and other potential stakeholders throughout the region was consistently noted, but the required advocacy around this was also felt to be the area that many people felt was beyond their personal control. The leadership skills to make a convincing argument are rare and in the South West, it was felt that the sector had few effective champions.

Turning Point notes the potential threat of a leadership crisis in the visual arts resulting from a preponderance of people leaving the sector at mid-career. The poor working conditions in the public sector of the visual arts, has led to a migration of talented individuals into the commercial sector where it was cited, ‘...the rewards are not only financial, but also creative and supportive, offering focused and unencumbered working with artists.’ While regionally the commercial sector is not as potent a pull due a lack of a commercial network, the issue of the mid-career ‘glass ceiling’ commented on has a similar effect, leaving a problematic weakness in the region’s leadership. (This is not to say that the South West is bereft of leadership—there are some strong effective leaders who have a voice beyond their own organisations, but they are not as numerous as might be hoped for and the distances across the region without an effective network through which to liaise with others, can cause their influence to be circumscribed by the geography.)

Joint working and partnership has proved an effective means of increasing the profile of the visual arts in the region and building stronger resources. Bristol’s hosting of *British Art Show 6* in 2006 garnered £900,000 worth of publicity and brought in £1.3 million into the local economy. Arnolfini’s partnership with Bristol’s City Museum and Art Gallery was a successful alliance in securing £1 million pounds in funding from The Art Fund for the purchasing of contemporary art for the Museum’s collection. The South West Curatorial Network provided a valuable interface between the region’s curators offering face-to-face and online discourse and important opportunities to ‘go and see.’

But some facilitation is required to maximise the potential for joint working and partnership. While these do happen on an ad-hoc basis, a stronger culture of this kind of working will grow from collaborative projects which bring diverse organisations together, effective networking and dialogue both online and in person, and a stronger awareness of the activities of other organisations at an early stage of their development. There is also a need to link the sub-regions together more, particularly in relation to a unified advocacy message. Organisations were often aware of what the issues were in their area, but less sure about the region as a whole. Shared communications and cohesion around a shared message about the value of the visual arts to the region could raise the sector's profile across the South West as a whole and nationally.

While these three areas pre-conditioned the focus of the research, people throughout all three of the areas were asked if they felt there were any pressing issues other than the ones looked at in the consultation process. Two areas were widely commented on: 1) a need to cultivate a culture of contemporary collecting in the region, helping to strengthen the commercial infrastructure; and 2) the need to develop more affordable work space for artists and support independent grass-roots activity in more effective ways.

BVAC had as an objective support and facilitation of collecting initiatives. It worked with both The Collective Bristol, a group of buyers who pool funds to purchase artworks which are then jointly owned and shared, and Contemporary Collectors, Bristol and Bath which organised a year-long programme of events to engage people in contemporary art and collecting. The Collective Bristol has continued but Contemporary Collectors, Bristol and Bath was unable to move forward due to a lack of leadership in its second year. The roll-out of *Turning Point* in the North and West Midlands has featured aims to develop contemporary collecting and both have significant initiatives in process. This could be an area to further develop, particularly as the South West has a wealth of open studios and art trails in which artists open their doors to the public.

The need to develop more affordable studio space is an ongoing and intractable issue on a national level. To make headway requires committed joint working across the visual arts community, local authorities, and regional bodies and an active and persuasive campaign for the value of the cultural sector (and not just the creative industries) in economic terms and within regeneration settings. It also would need an interface between developers with empty space, local authorities and the visual arts community—a communications network that would take considerable thought and care to get right. However, there is the potential for a valuable symbiotic relationship between the three stakeholders, where artists get space, developers get rate relief and responsible tenants and local authorities have active and engaged communities where there might be disuse and decay.

Recommendations and Proposals

The report closes with a series of recommendations on supporting and strengthening the visual arts sector in the region across the three areas of audience development, professional development and advocacy. These include: improving networking and peer to peer learning; improve training and access to training; enabling shared communication channels; raising the level of critical debate; support artist-led and independent programmes of work; developing skills and resources for audience development through the region and encouraging sustainable long-term engagement with new audiences; enabling a strong profile for the visual arts sector in the region; among other things.

We emphasise that these are our suggestions, based on both the research and on our own experience at Bristol Visual Arts Consortium. It is in no way intended to be proscriptive but merely to provide a starting point for discussions. We hope that you find this of use.

What kind of Physical Infrastructure might this work need?

The recommendations above will require an infrastructure of support to implement. We believe that there are two key pieces of infrastructure required for an effective Turning Point Network and the development of stronger and more effective partnerships in the visual arts across the South West:

1. Staffing
2. On line resources and communication

1. Staffing

The sector itself cannot achieve what is needed without staffing support and partnership working. We believe, in a region this large and diverse, that Turning Point agents need to be positioned in key localities rather than Turning Point staff being located in one single organisation.

Properly positioned the appointment(s) could aim to:

Audience Development

- Improve networking between on a directorial level and across audience development staff
- Develop the skills and the resources for audience development within a wide range of organisations in the region
- Support shared audience development initiatives and encourage organisations to take a long term community engagement approach to audience development instead of a one-off-project approach
- Ensure access to high quality evaluation expertise that can articulate the qualitative as well as the quantitative audience outcomes.

Professional Development

- Ensure excellent individuals and organisations by sharing knowledge, resources and reducing isolation
- Support people to “do it themselves” and raise the level of critical debate
- Improve training and access to training and other professional development opportunities
- Enable an action research programme around artist learning and support

Advocacy

- Support the sector to increase its profile
- Enable shared communications channels
- Ensure and disseminate robust evaluations that focus on the impact of the work on audiences and communities
- Initiate and support collecting projects

- Initiate programmes of work which celebrate the South West's approach to internationalism

2. Online resources

Many of the recommendations could be widely and well implemented through the creation of web resource for the region's Visual Arts sector. A web resource could provide the core information and 'meeting point' for the Turning Point network in the South West.

Theatre Bristol has created an exemplar web site for the performing arts sector and its success illustrates the significant role that a web presence could play in supporting and strengthening the sector. Theatre Bristol's web site www.theatrebristol.net is a multi-faceted resource that is directed at a varying range of people working in the performing arts sector. It includes listings, news, jobs, opportunities, resources, 'showcases' (highlighting work), a notice-board and sector directory. It is a vital point of information exchange and networking and is widely used.

While the visual arts sector is distinct from the performing arts sector and it is important to recognize this and not seek merely to replicate a visual arts version of Theatre Bristol's site, it does provide much food for thought on the potential of an online resource for a sector. Because the South West region is the largest in the U.K., travel time is a real consideration for arts professionals seeking to exchange skills, information and know-how. The distance between Stroud and Penzance is the better part of a day's journey. There is a strong divide between city and rural locales and some perception that city centre organisations don't consider audiences in their rural surroundings and that nothing of quality happens in rural areas. Such perceptions are important to shift, so that urban and rural areas have a more integrated relationship. A web site with region-wide information can make people aware of the breadth of what is on offer and help amalgamate communications across the region. Similarly, it can bring artists and arts organisations throughout the region into better contact by offering ways through which they can engage with each other despite the distance, building communities of interest which supersede those of locality.

In particular, a web resource could play a significant role in:

Improving the signposting of training and development opportunities

- Filtering the information regarding training and development available to arts organisations in order to make it manageable and relevant to them
- Enabling better access to existing opportunities as well as ensuring new opportunities for staff in visual arts organisations to benefit from the experience held in the sector by disseminating information about examples of best practice
- Amalgamating communications
- Joining up communities of interest
- Creating platforms for discussion and debate

A web resource would create a centre-point for information and a place where artists and organisations can meet, share and debate and will also provide information, resources and signposting to other relevant resources. Further, regular e-bulletins and Twitters could keep people up to date with developments.

Appendix: Proposed Outline for a Turning Point South West Web Resource

A web resource could support the visual arts development in the identified areas in the following ways:

Audience Development

The Visual Arts Development report identified lack of expertise in audience development as a key issue for the smaller visual arts organisations which are abundant in the region (as well as for many of the larger ones). Resources in this area would be focused on increasing basic knowledge and understanding of marketing and audience development. An 'Ask the Expert' feature could also have value in raising awareness of who is knowledgeable both in the region and outside. The following are just some items which could be covered:

- Downloadable basic 'how to' documents on the principles of marketing and audience development along with examples of best practice and suggestions of where to go for further support
- Best practice case studies in marketing and audience development—these could be contributed by audience development staff around the region and country offering them an opportunity to showcase significant work that they have done
- Database of key research studies on audience development in the visual arts and associated sectors across the UK
- Database of audience research in the South West region—a one stop shop to finding all audience development research through the South West region, broken down by county
- An 'Ask the Expert' feature that would address specific questions about audience development issues answered by an experienced audience development specialist in the region and beyond. The 'Expert' could be invited to respond bi-weekly to a selection of questions submitted to the site for a period of 2 months and could be showcased on the site along with a selection of his / her responses.
- Forums around communities of interest enabling joint working and knowledge transfer

Professional Development

There were an array of varying issues raised around professional development needs for artists, curators and arts professionals (each different). While there is strong professional development provision available through the region, there was consistent feedback on the need for better signposting of opportunities both regionally and nationally. As the South West Curatorial Network is an excellent regional support for curators, it would make sense for this site to focus more on artists and arts professionals while directing curator to the South West Curatorial Network site. A web resource could include:

- Viewpoint – an opinion forum where an artist and arts professional are invited to share an opinion about a current issue in the visual arts and to participate in an online discussion forum. Viewpoint could change monthly.
- Downloadable business development documents for artists, including information on being VAT registered, operating as a sole trader, developing a web site, etc.
- Postings of professional development opportunities (regionally and nationally) and a place to log suggestions for types of professional development needed that could be fed back to appropriate organisations involved in CPD.
- A place to network and promote informal creative learning forums where artists and arts professionals could to self-organise around CPD needs and professional concerns, e.g. start a professional reading group in Bath, find or found a peer critique group in Taunton, organise outings to exhibitions and events.
- Signpost for where and how artists could get training and expertise in specialist fields—Community Arts, Public Art, Arts and Health, Digital training. This could also include overviews of working in these varying areas written by key arts professionals—Public Art: Cameron Cartiere; Arts and Health: Jane Willis; Gallery Education: Jane Sillis; Community Arts: Frances Williams.

Advocacy

The Visual Arts Development report identified Advocacy as an ongoing area of concern for the sector, with frequently cited need to clearly ‘make the case’ for the economic and social value of the visual arts to local authorities and key stakeholders in the region. The web

resource could collate information with which to make the case for the sector as well as providing profile. This could include:

- Sharing of economic and social impact studies and commentary on these, plus headline findings which can be utilised in discussion with key influencers
- Regularly updated key visual arts news from around the region
- Links to visual arts organisation's own websites.

Though the website will initially be geared towards artists and visual arts organisational directors, curators, educators and marketers, there is potential to draw a wider audience through some basic informational features. The site could become the first 'go to' choice for finding out what available to see and do in the region's visual arts, and further development to engage audiences could lead to a more dynamic dialogue between audiences, artists and arts organisations.