

DEMOS

Provocation

**Local Authorities:
A Change in the Cultural Climate?**

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John Holden
Head of Culture

0207 367 6324
john.holden@demos.co.uk

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Glossary

ACE	Arts Council England
ALG	Association of London Government
CABE	Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment
CIPFA	Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy
CLOA	Chief Leisure Officers' Association
CPA	Comprehensive Performance Assessment
DCLG	Department for Communities and Local Government
DCMS	Department for Culture, Media and Sport
EPCS	Environmental, Protective and Cultural Services
FSS	Formula Spending Share
LAA	Local Area Agreements
LGA	Local Government Association
MLA	Museums, Libraries and Archives Council
Nalgao	National Association of Local Government Arts Officers
Ndpbs	Non-Departmental Public Bodies
NS	National Statistics
PSA	Public Service Agreement
RCComms	Regional Cultural Commentaries

1 Introduction

One of the most important roles of local authorities is as place-shapers. The decisions that they make determine, in large part, the look and feel of our cities, towns and villages. Similarly, the range of possibilities for what citizens can do is powerfully influenced by the infrastructure that Local Authorities invest in. “Places to go and things to do” was offered to me as an alternative to the word “culture” to describe the range of things that local authorities enable.

Swimming pools, libraries, concert halls, theatres and the rest, are the bedrock of the public realm – spaces where people come together and relate as citizens, not just consumers. These places are what make our localities distinctive - and local distinctiveness is very much valued by people, as the Heritage Lottery Fund's citizen's juries have discovered. If elected members want to build local legitimacy and engage local people, they need to start by building the focal points of community life - which means cultural and sporting facilities as much as anything else. Building bridges between the local and the global – connecting our young people to the worldwide creative economy for example - is a key task for local authorities, and one where culture has a vital role to play. The recent White Paper, *Strong and Prosperous Communities*, recognises this connection, but completely fails to acknowledge the central role of culture in shaping the individuality of local places, and enriching people's lives. For culture, it is a missed opportunity. Culture is fundamental to most of the things that local politics is trying to achieve, from nurturing a creative younger generation to keeping the elderly mentally and physically fit. For example, study facilities are the most in-demand spaces in public libraries,¹ while visits to museums by the very old (70+) have increased by 6% in each of the last two years².

But despite the importance of culture in people's everyday lives, there are many signs that, at local level, the services that go to make culture available to everybody are facing a serious crisis in some parts of the country. At local authority level, culture has neither established itself independently as an unquestioned good – much of what constitutes culture is not a statutory spending requirement for example – but nor has everyone been persuaded that culture has a vital role to play in the delivery of other mainstream council services.

Over the past few months I have spoken to people working in local government, the cultural ndpbs (Non Departmental Public Bodies), and in cultural organisations. From their varied viewpoints, many are worried about the place of culture in local authority thinking, and the trends that are affecting culture at the grass-roots level. In particular, they are worried about money. Recent press reports have highlighted library closures, the threatened closure of Berwick-upon-Tweed museum because the Council needs to save £200,000³ and the proposed disposal, on financial grounds, of a major work of art from a local authority museum. Leaving aside the rights and wrongs of the sale, the main issue is that Bury is selling its Lowry, not in order to rearrange its cultural provision, but to plug a hole in its finances. Wayne Campbell, the leader of Bury Council talked of “the real decisions faced by a poorly-funded public authority, anxious to ensure its spending was directed to vulnerable children, as Bury had to face in 2005/06.”⁴ This begs the question, what is different *now* from last year or the year before? Clearly, Berwick and Bury feel that they have run out of room for manoeuvre, and culture has borne the brunt.

The problem is not confined to a single local authority. The 2006 survey by the National Association of Local Government Arts Officers concluded, yet again, that there will be widespread cuts in arts spending, with 75% of respondents reporting cuts in real terms. More local authorities are joining a year-on year trend by abandoning the arts altogether: twenty-five local authorities have cut their arts services completely in the last five years. In 2006, Thanet, Somerset, Cotswold, Windsor & Maidenhead, Maldon, Congleton and Fenland are all expected to cut their arts services or make their arts officer redundant. Phil Clapp, now Deputy Director for Creative Industries Division at the DCMS, warned at this year's nalgaio conference that “the pressures on a non-statutory service such as the arts

are likely to become more rather than less pronounced.”⁵ These pressures don’t always create spectacular headlines about closures and the sale of major works of art. But below the surface, they are eating away at the fabric of culture. Just one example: the Art Newspaper recently claimed that Ipswich Museums Service appears not to have insured its major collection of paintings, including Gainsboroughs and Constables “due to cutbacks in local authority support.”⁶

It looks like there is a major problem brewing, but it is very difficult to say precisely how big – which in itself is part of the problem. Local authorities are the custodians of many aspects of the public realm, but there is no ‘system’ as such, - and hence no consistent, working mechanism for reporting. In spite of the mass of legislation, regulation and initiatives that apply, it is surprisingly difficult to find out even the most basic facts about what is going on. The best estimates of how much local authorities spend in total on sport, museums, and libraries, parks and the arts is £4.37 billion for the financial year 2003/04. This is to be found in *Local Government Finance Statistics England No.16*⁷ on the website of the Department for Communities and Local Government. The sheer size of that number emphasises the importance of the role of local authorities, but the report does not delve into the detail of how the money is spent, or where; and it does not tell us what is happening now, or what is likely to happen in the future. There are no simple answers to many pressing questions. One politician asked me, ‘when it comes to local government and the arts, is the glass half full or half empty?’ The answer is neither - it depends on where you live. In some places culture is healthy and thriving, in others it faces decline.

We need to dig deeper than the headline figures. Averaged over the last five years, overall revenue spending on leisure and recreation services by local authorities appears to be just about keeping pace with inflation (see appendix) and there are many positive things happening, including library refurbishments, lottery investment in heritage, and music education initiatives. More libraries are opening for longer, and there have been striking cultural success stories from the Sage Gateshead to Gosport Discovery Centre. My point here is not to say that everything is terrible; it is to say that some authorities are in trouble, and that because of the way that culture is treated – legislatively, financially and philosophically - at local authority level, the situation is likely to get worse unless we do something about it now.

I have tried to understand the reality that lies behind the press reports and anecdotal evidence but getting a grip on the information is a formidably difficult task. There are no complete aggregate figures covering the full range of cultural services in the UK, and even discovering the facts about detailed issues is problematic. To give just one example, the Daily Telegraph ran a story that 100 libraries are threatened with closure.⁸ Public perceptions form a reality of their own, so this is a serious issue, yet the story went unchallenged. As far as I can tell, there have been only 11 library closures, with more threatened in Lancashire, Buckinghamshire, Devon, Dorset and Surrey. We should be careful not to count as closures either redevelopments or sensible changes that reflect changes in population. Nevertheless, while new library developments are everywhere showing that investment leads to renaissance, in other parts of the country services are being cut. The root of the problem of poor information lies in the fragmentary and multi-layered 'system' of culture, as described later. Poor information is not just a feature of the system, it is a consequence. This is an important point, because it means that calls for more and better information are unlikely to be fulfilled unless some deeper, structural issues are sorted out.

This lack of public clarity about public services in itself points to the need for much more research to be done, and this report argues that a much fuller analysis must be undertaken. When the picture is confused and the causes of problems are complex and difficult to understand, as here, the difficulties themselves are easier to ignore. History, from the battle of Salamis to global warming, is full of examples of waiting too long for complete information to come in. We must act now. It is vital that in the current round of local authority budget setting that both local and central government understand the crucial role that local authorities play in securing the country's cultural life, and how other council and national priorities would be hit if culture is neglected.

A public value approach to service provision is one where, according to the Secretary of State for Culture Media and Sport, "instead of funding what we think is important, we'd start by asking people what's important to them and then thinking about how to protect it. That means asking the public what they value in their local area, and then allocating funding accordingly". Countless surveys show that the public value culture highly. For example 82% say they want to have a local museum or art gallery,⁹ and a poll in Bolton showed that both users and non-users of the town's library and museum

would be prepared to spend more on them than is actually spent.¹⁰ But in some places local government is failing to recognise this, and in others it is unable to act even if it wants to. Local authorities must give their full support to the maintenance of our cultural infrastructure and the growth of cultural activity. Culture is a public good, just as much as clean air, domestic security, public health and universal education, but too often it is treated as marginal rather than being seen as central to the lives of citizens and to the achievement of local authority aims.

2 The role of Local Authorities in supporting culture

Local authorities are a vital component of the mixed economy that supports culture in the U.K. In fact, when it comes to culture, local authorities are on the front line. In many places, it is local authority employees who interact directly with the public in venues, libraries, sports facilities and museums. Central government, local government, NDPBs, trusts and foundations, businesses, individual donors and members of the public all play their part, but their roles are different. Local authorities are essential in terms of funding, infrastructure and nurturing the new. Their cultural activities provide the direct, small-scale, local connection with the public that central government is increasingly trying to nurture.

2a) Funding

The first question is, what is the scale of local authority funding for culture? This is a very difficult question to answer. Culture, as defined at local level to include sport and tourism, is supported by money from different budget streams (that bring with them different priorities), so that is impossible to determine the overall spend. Money from education or from adult service budgets may flow into public libraries for example, but the total is impossible to calculate. The surveys that have attempted to put a figure on local authority spending are all incomplete, and often extrapolate from limited samples. They also do not compare like with like. The DCLG figure of £4.37 billion *total* local authority spend on culture in 2003/04 sits alongside CIPFA's estimated total of *revenue* expenditure of £2.82 billion – suggesting capital expenditure of around £1.55 billion; except that the figures are compiled on a different basis, so that no such conclusion can be drawn.

The best available information about funding for culture comes from three documents.

i) Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy

The first is the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy's (CIPFA) leisure and recreation statistics.¹¹ These are collected annually on a voluntary basis from local authorities in England and Wales, with a roughly 70% annual response rate. National totals are extrapolated from the sample, and the constituency of the sample varies from one year to the next. The lag time between

what is happening and the reporting of it is commendably short, and the most recent estimates are for 2005/06. The figures show that, averaged over the last five years, local authority revenue spending on cultural services has kept roughly in line within inflation, but that in the last two years it has fallen behind, with 1.4% increases each year. That represents a cut in real terms. What the CIPFA figures also show is that, in their words, "net expenditure per head of population on leisure and recreation facilities is subject to considerable geographical variation."¹² This is clear from the differences in spending by different types of local authority. The figures, which can be found in detail in the appendix, also show big differences between different types of spending, with "theatres and public entertainment", "arts development", "recreation and sport", and "heritage" being worst hit.

Total estimated net revenue spending on cultural services (x£1000) and year on year increases

	Total recreation and leisure Services	Total library services	Total archive services	Total all cultural services	Total increase	Percentage increase
2001-02	1,691,911	810,777	44,093	2,546,781		
2002-03	1,732,957	887,371	47,361	2,667,689	120,908	4.7
2003-04	1,848,093	924,789	51,150	2,824,032	156,343	5.9
2004-05	1,849,622	958,481	54,691	2,862,794	38,762	1.4
2005-06	1,872,658	972,945	58,404	2,904,007	41,213	1.4

Estimated total revenue expenditure on *leisure and recreation services* per local authority type (x£1000)

	London boroughs	Metropolitan Districts	English Unitary Authorities	English Counties	English non-Met Districts	Total England	Wales	Total All Authorities
2001-02	225,148	378,192	289,396	77,636	596,815	1,567,187	124,724	1,691,911
2002-03	230,964	387,108	286,868	90,005	597,828	1,592,773	140,184	1,732,957

2003-04	243,446	435,996	300,293	95,957	626,488	1,702,180	145,913	1,848,093
2004-05	230,886	418,139	306,073	98,147	645,753	1,698,998	150,624	1,849,622
2005-06	225,238	418,285	330,441	103,325	635,329	1,712,618	160,040	1,872,658

Actual total revenue expenditure on *library services* (excluding school library services)

	London boroughs	Metropolitan Districts	English Unitary Authorities	English Counties		Total England	Wales	Total All Authorities
2001-02	163,542	180,394	123,881	305,699		773,516	37,261	810,777
2002-03	171,994	196,111	138,362	338,730		845,197	42,174	887,371
2003-04	179,534	201,544	141,685	358,216		880,979	43,810	924,789
2004-05	184,831	206,135	146,571	375,084		912,621	45,860	958,481
2005-06*	189,455	208,592	149,600	378,557		926,205	46,740	972,945

*Estimated Figures

Estimated total revenue expenditure on *archive services* per local authority type (x£1000)

	London boroughs	Metropolitan Districts	English Unitary Authorities	English Counties	Metropolitan areas	Total England	Wales	Total All Authorities
2001-02	2,233	3,610	2,384	27,325	5,128	40,680	3,413	44,093
2002-03	2,109	3,193	2,520	28,928	6,671	43,421	3,940	47,361
2003-04	2,065	3,337	2,594	32,681	6,210	46,887	4,263	51,150
2004-05	2,136	3,433	2,421	35,313	7,038	50,332	4,359	54,691
2005-06	2,521	4,233	2,391	37,547	7,654	54,346	4,058	58,404

ii) Local Government Association/York Consulting

The importance of culture to the Local Government Association is highlighted in the recent decision to create a new LGA Board specifically on Culture, Tourism and Sport. They, more than any other

body, have attempted to judge the scale of the current problems by commissioning research from York Consulting: *The Impact of Spending Review 2004 on Local Authority Spending on Cultural Services*.

This report was commissioned because “anecdotal evidence has suggested that spending on cultural services is being squeezed.”¹³ What this survey in fact revealed was a widening gap between different local authorities’ spending on culture. It shows that roughly forty per cent of authorities are increasing their investment with a similar percentage decreasing their investment. The decreases appear to have occurred most sharply in unitary authorities – 80% reported decreases ‘to a limited extent.’¹⁴ Although the qualifier “to a limited extent” might seem a source of comfort, we should realise that culture is an area that has traditionally been run on a shoestring, where small decreases can cut bone and not fat.

A further trend highlighted by that report is that local authorities have increasingly sought to expand the role played by the private and voluntary sectors. If this is done well, it can improve services, but one interpretation of this tendency is that it is happening “because of constraints on (authorities’) own organisational and financial resources.”¹⁵ Twenty four per cent of authorities have introduced public/private partnerships, and not necessarily in pursuit of higher standards. As the LGA report says, “The availability and use of external funding is a particular issue for cultural services given the non-statutory nature of much of provision, and the consequent scale of grant support supplied for cultural services by central government through the EPCS (Environmental, Protective and Culture Services) block.”¹⁶ In total, 72% of local authorities reported that the loss of external funding would have a “significant impact”¹⁷ on their ability to maintain current levels of cultural service provision.

iii) National Association of Local Authority Arts Officers

The third document is the annual nalgaio survey. This applies only to the arts and is from a limited number of respondents, but with every year that passes there is a clear trend for arts spending to reduce in a worryingly large proportion of authorities. In the 2006 survey, 38% of arts services said they were operating under smaller budgets than the previous year. Adjusted for inflation, 75% of authorities have had cuts, while seven authorities have cut their arts services completely – adding to the 18 that had taken the same decision in the previous four years.¹⁸ All of this has led Paul Kelly of nalgaio, writing in *Arts Professional* in December 2005, to conclude that “incremental cuts over several years are now threatening the very fabric of local authority arts provision.”¹⁹

The position in the arts shows great variation from place to place, and it is the same with libraries. There is no uniform pattern. Total library visitor numbers are up, as are total library opening hours and the provision of computers. But since 2000, 81 (mostly mobile) libraries have closed, book stocks have decreased by 11.3% and the number of loans has fallen by 100 million per annum.²⁰ Again, the totals and averages mask considerable differences between one place and another.

Beyond the arts and libraries, other areas are also showing stress. Tourist offices are closing in the South East, and nationally playing fields are being lost. Over the last 13 years, according to figures quoted by Sports Minister Richard Caborn, nearly 34,000 sports pitches across England have disappeared, which led Mrs Alison Moore-Gwyn, Director of the National Playing Fields Association to comment in August 2005 “These figures are truly appalling. We have been saying for years that the situation was bad, but it is far worse than anyone suspected.”²¹

2b) *Explaining the funding trends*

It is clear from the data that is available that in some places culture is well supported and that in others it is under threat. What is the explanation for this?

One major reason can be found in the mechanism through which central government has used to fund local government. The EPCS block of the Formula Spending Share, has which governed the financial settlement for local authorities’ activities in Environment, Protective and Cultural services, has “fared badly in recent spending rounds...The allocation for 2005/06 represents, in mean terms, an increase of only 0.25 per cent...therefore equating to a marginal fall in real terms.”²²

Within this overall trend, different settlements at local level are leading to much worse situations in some places. A report to the Association of London Government’s Culture and Tourism steering group in June 2004 tells us that: “The 2003/04 finance settlement was generally considered a very poor settlement for many London councils. In particular, London Councils saw a significant decrease in their share of allocation under the new EPCS block.”²³

The EPCS grant was never split into amounts for each individual service, but

confusingly, the funding formula for local authorities has changed significantly in 2006/07. The grant formula still contains an assessment of spending needs for the various service blocks including EPCS services, but the grant calculation has changed so that there is no longer any explicit reference to the Government's assumption about spending need for each service block in cash terms. The settlement works very much to the disadvantage of most counties in the South East. But these changes have been masked by transitional protection – the losers have temporary relief while the 'gainers' from the changes are being denied most of their gains. What this means is that in the short term the grant formula is largely an irrelevance.

The technical processes of local authority funding do not tell the whole story. Paul Kelly's diagnosis in *Arts Professional* about declining arts funding is this: "We suggest there are three causes. First the arts are non-statutory. This means that when local authorities have to make budget cuts, the arts are an easy target – non-statutory, comparatively small and 'soft'.... Second some commentators claim that recent re-jigging of the local government finance system has led to a North/South divide in funding settlements as part of the initiative to address poverty and deprivation in Northern areas. This resulted in double-digit council tax increases in some Southern authorities – well above inflation. Thirdly, this led to the 'pensioners' revolt' and a resultant government sensitivity over the annual council tax increase, putting more pressure on local authority budgets and services."²⁴

This is a perceptive analysis. Cuts will always fall first on areas of discretionary spending, particularly where those areas are financially unpredictable, and where a higher degree of risk exists (and it is undeniable that art – especially new work - is a risky financial proposition). As compulsory spending and overspends on such things as adult and children's services continually grow, culture is being squeezed and is running out of options, as the examples of Bury and Berwick show.

But there are other factors at work as well. As we have noted, local authority funding for culture operates within a highly complex framework of regulation, initiatives, partnerships and directives. Here is a list of only some of them: Public Library Impact Measures; Active People Survey; Cultural Pathfinders programme; Beacon Council Scheme; Creative Partnerships; Cultural Hubs; MLA Peer review programme; Best value; Sport Playing its Part; Local Government and the Arts – a vision for

partnership; Regional Cultural Consortia; Local Cultural Strategies; Regional Economic Strategies; Renaissance in the Regions, Local Strategic Partnerships; Tomorrow's Tourism Today; Historic Environment-Local Management; Planning guidance; Every Child Matters; Annual Efficiency Statements; and Sustainable Community Strategies.

Local authorities' attitudes and actions in relation to culture are shaped by this range of central government and ndpb approaches, but local authorities are also subject to a broad ranging monitoring and assessment that covers all their activities, the most important of which are the Audit Commission Service Inspection, and the Gershon Review, neither of which appears to be working well in relation to culture. The Audit Commission says that the inspection regime focuses on "outcomes, access, impact and value for money",²⁵ but as Jamie Cowling of the Institute for Public Policy Research has pointed out, the approach is dominated by a fairly crude set of outcomes, and avoids looking at quality.²⁶ As for the Gershon review, this attempt to move resources to the front line of services is likely to put pressure on non-statutory services as local authorities look for discretionary areas to make savings.

3. The place of Culture in Local Authorities

One fundamental problem with culture is that it has fallen between two stools. It has failed to establish itself as an autonomous sphere; in other words it is not universally accepted as a public good in its own right. Some elected members still consider culture to be an elite preoccupation, or at least lower in the pecking order than other council services. On the other hand, neither is culture fully accepted as central to the achievement of other aims.

The consequence is that within many local authorities, the place of culture is ambiguous, with councils positioning it in radically different places. For example it has been reported recently that “one venue has, in the last two years, journeyed through the education unit, social services, health and leisure and come to rest as a nominal code within economic development.”²⁷

3a) the lack of a coherent cultural system.

The heart of the problem is that there is no coherent cultural system for local authorities to relate to. In any particular area, local authority cultural provision is determined by

- Legislation, including the Licensing Act 2003, the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964, and the Theatres Act 1968 – as well as a host of other statutes ranging from employment law to health and safety. The important thing about the legislative framework is that it gives local authorities a mix of discretionary and non-discretionary functions. Local authorities are required to provide a public library service but not to make music available. They must maintain the historic buildings that they own and protect archaeological sites that lie within their boundaries, but they do not need to provide swimming pools or a theatre. And of course, as Bury council have determined, the statutory need to protect vulnerable children will, in the end have to be given greater priority than non-statutory spending on a museum.
- A local inheritance of historical (and sometimes historic) infrastructure, some of which may be a burdensome responsibility (such as a private archive that a local authority has taken over in the past), and some a free resource, (for example where a town is lucky enough to host a national museum.)

- A choice of public/private/voluntary sector options, between direct ownership and management at one extreme and fully commercial privatisation at the other, with many variations in between. (None of these is inherently superior, and indeed the choices increase local autonomy; my point here is to emphasise the heterogeneous nature of the cultural field.)

The result of all this is, as we have seen, radically different cultural settlements in different local authorities.

3b) over- arching cultural policy trends

Local authorities are subject to a set of long-term trends within policy that dictate their approach to culture and to how they make decisions. It is impossible to understand how local authorities treat culture without reference to two fundamental trends in policy.

i) Culture as a 'public service'

Culture is treated by government as a public service in exactly the same way as other public services, but there are ways in which culture is distinctly different:

- People engage with culture because they want to. You have to obey a summons, you have to send your children to school, you need to go to hospital when you break a leg. By contrast, people go to swimming pools, libraries and theatres of their own volition. They give of their time, and they even pay money. People also trust their cultural services – especially libraries, where they go not just for recreation, but to access a whole range of information from health to jobs. These factors should give culture a secure place in the public realm. It is less about responding to need by delivering a service, and more about enabling people to create their own lives. In the context of moves towards greater personalisation of services for citizens, and greater localism, culture should be considered as not just important, but leading the way.
- Ideas of standardisation and best practice do not translate easily into the cultural world. In the health service, demonstrable improvements can be made by changing practices, following a linear logic and obvious chain of cause and effect. Cleaning wards properly cuts down rates of infection, quicker ambulance response times means fewer fatalities. Culture is less subject to

standardisation of effect. This is because culture operates at a personal level: a musical performance will leave some members of an audience in ecstasies and leave others unmoved. A visit to the gym will help one person lose weight, but might just give another a heart attack. Ideas about cause and effect are less applicable, and less developed, in cultural services. This is one reason why culture has not yet become central to the delivery of council priorities with Local Area Agreements: evidence-gathering and measurement are not easy (see Selwood, Ellis, Holden, Rand Corporation).²⁸

- Issues of quality are much more contested in culture than in other areas of public life; everyone has an opinion, and even the right to express opinions is contested. Who should make decisions about public art, for example? People tend not to question the decisions of their dentist, but cultural decisions are up for grabs.
- Culture is like the air, taken for granted and thus hidden – except when it is under threat. This accounts for the paradox of people’s high level of satisfaction with culture, yet their reluctance to prioritise spending on it. Polls consistently show that the public both want and enjoy culture –48% of the population have used a public library in the last twelve months, the National Archives website receives 85 million requests for information every year; 66% have attended at least one arts even in the last twelve months; 32% regularly participate in sport.²⁹ Culture tends to be noticed only when it is threatened - as many local authorities find out when they suggest closing public libraries, with Buckinghamshire and Dorset providing recent examples.

These factors give culture and sport a special place in public life; a place that people perceive to be non-partisan and non-commercial. It is crucial that government does not destroy this - either by neglect or co-option - but instead supports this vital part of civil society.

ii) Culture as a means to an end

There is clear trend in policy to see culture *only* as a means to social and economic ends. There are many examples in the policy literature to support the argument that the relationship between central government, the ndpbs and local authorities is dominated by this approach:

- The recent Local Government White Paper contains very few references to culture, and those paragraphs that mention it do so in purely instrumental terms: "Sporting and cultural activity and events can generate significant economic, commercial and social benefits, both locally and nationally."³⁰; and "Provision of a range of cultural facilities, coupled with a high quality environment, can also be a major attractor to businesses and workers. Cultural facilities and events, including the creation of a 'cultural sector' in a city, can enhance the image of an area, creating a sense of place and civic pride."³¹
- DCMS's *Working Together: Local authorities and the DCMS* asks the question "How can Local authorities *use culture* and sport to help their own community priorities?"³² (my italics)
- MLA, in their document aimed at local authorities, *Communities need Museums, Libraries and Archives: delivering through Local Area Agreements*, state that: "The museum, library and archive sector is uniquely placed *to help deliver outcomes* for local communities...outcomes that contribute to LAA blocks."³³ (my italics).
- ACE's *Local Government and the Arts, a vision for partnership* says that there are four priorities: The Creative Economy, Healthy Communities, Vital Neighbourhoods and Engaging Young People.³⁴
- The Audit Commission's inspection regime for culture focuses its key lines of enquiry on Safer and Stronger communities, Healthier Communities, Economic Vitality, Learning and Quality of Life for Local people.

As I will argue later, it is essential that local authorities *do* understand that culture has profound social and economic effects, and that they *do* appreciate the degree to which the achievement of their stated aims and objectives (such as healthy economies and vibrant communities) will be undermined if they neglect culture. But the trend to view culture only as a means to other ends means that culture, rather than having autonomous budgets, must increasingly find funding from other budget holders. This is apparent from the LGA report of December 2005, which says that "nearly nine out of ten authorities state that their approaches to cultural services delivery now included greater partnership working... the increase of partnership working may reflect the need or desire to pull in funding from external agencies..."³⁵ Some see this as a good thing – after all, partnership is to be encouraged, and if culture is getting the money, does it matter where it comes from? Well yes it does.

- First, because the demands of other budget holders will influence the cultural output and change the cultural landscape.
- The core needs to be maintained: by definition, all non-culture budget holders have their own priorities, all desirable in themselves. But the things that they want to achieve can only happen if a cultural core exists. It is no good expecting actors to take their show to an old people's home if they have no base to operate from.
- When budgets are under stress, budget-holders retreat to their core; if cultural organisations are dependent on non-cultural funding, what will happen when that funding dries up?

It is essential that the sporting and cultural budgets themselves are maintained. If they are not, then, as Adrian Ellis puts it, the danger is that “funding patterns are skewed towards the marginal cost of marginal programmes and peripheral capital infrastructure whilst core activities remain under funded and core responsibilities inadequately or grudgingly recognised.”³⁶

4. New Initiatives

There have been three relatively recent developments that are potentially helpful.

4a) Local Area Agreements and Local Development Plans

The new *Local Area Agreements* show potential for revitalising cultural funding. These agreements were initially trialled in 21 authorities over 2004-2005, and extended to a further 66 authorities over 2005-2006, and in round three will include all county and unitary authorities. The Department for Communities and Local Government claims that Local Area Agreements represent “a radical new approach to the way local authorities and their partners can use government funding”.³⁷ These agreements can help pool funding sources and streamline applications processes, and this can lead to efficiency savings. They can also act as a framework for devolved service provision and can improve community input into local authority decision-making.

LAAs are focused on four blocks – Economic Development and Enterprise, Healthy Communities and Older People, Children and Young People and Safer and Stronger Communities. In 2006, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (as it then was) updated its guidance on LAAs and included an *optional* cultural outcome, to “enrich individual lives, strengthen communities and improve places where people live through culture and sport, including libraries and the historic environment.”³⁸

They have the potential to lever in significant resources, but reports in the cultural sector press suggest that cultural services do not seem to be taking full advantage of this. Research needs to be undertaken to find out why not.

4b) Comprehensive Performance Assessment and the Culture Block

Comprehensive Performance Assessments were introduced for Unitary and County councils in 2002, and for District councils in 2003. Councils that are seen to be performing well under the CPA can receive extra freedoms from central government, although those which perform poorly can face further prescriptive intervention. As the CPA includes a specific assessment of cultural services it provides a means for authorities with successful cultural strategies to cement and further them. The

positive potential of CPAs, however, is far from universally accepted. A recent LGA/MORI poll reported that over two-thirds of council leaders were dissatisfied with the increased freedom and flexibility on offer to councils deemed to be performing successfully.³⁹ And there is another, bigger, problem: the weighting of culture in the CPA mix is so small that councils can have mediocre cultural performance, and yet still attain a high score. This needs to be remedied in the next review of the CPA (or whatever replaces it) to ensure that the monitoring regime sends the right signals about culture.

4c) Regional Cultural Commentaries

Potentially a step in the right direction, Regional Cultural Commentaries are a means through which a structured conversation can take place between ndpbs and Regional and local authorities, with the intention of creating “a more rounded, locally driven, view of the cultural offering in a locality as an alternative to, or to complement, data based assessments.”⁴⁰ Within the plethora of initiatives that govern culture, this statement is a welcome breath of fresh air, but it is an opportunity that is still in its early days, and one that must not be lost. Commentaries can focus on grass roots input, giving a voice to cultural professionals who are closest to the issues that need to be addressed, but they must be focused on local needs and local people, rather than becoming another forum for discussion between national bodies. As well as Regional commentaries, Regional Cultural Consortia are in some regions also having a beneficial effect in enabling conversations across the sector, and into regional government and administration in the Regional Development Agencies.

5 What does Local Authority funding support?

Most media commentary about the arts and culture concentrates on our national institutions and on bodies like the Arts Council. Local authorities have a lower profile, but are equally important. They tend to fund the unglamorous but essential parts of the cultural ecology. They maintain buildings, they support community facilities, and they are very often the first port of call for those seeking public funding for their first steps in the cultural world. They are also the major providers of revenue funding, that category of essential, regular income that makes everything else – all the ‘project funded’ work – possible. Without local authorities, the ndpbs could not do what they do; they could not reach people en masse.

5a) Infrastructure

Without the infrastructure of spaces and places that local government provides, there would be little for other funders to build on. For example, in Basingstoke, the Anvil, a 1200 seat concert hall, receives about £750,000 from its local authority, covering the costs of keeping the building open. Most of the programming is self-financing from the box-office, while education work is funded by Trusts and the County Authority. Some areas of programming, such as world music and contemporary opera, are supported by ACE, and business sponsorship also forms a small part of the mix. None of these other funders, and consequently none of the activities that they finance, could take place if the bedrock revenue funding from the local authority was cut.

It is therefore very worrying that the LGA report tells us that nationally “revenue (funding for 2005/06) is budgeted to fall significantly, by over one-fifth (21 per cent) from the outturn figure for 2004/05. Revenue funding is often critical in supporting operational service delivery, and a decrease of this magnitude may have a considerable impact on local authority cultural services activities.”⁴¹

There is a further hidden threat here – as we all know from personal experience, inflation is a broad and crude measure of cost increases. Many cultural organisations have been subject to ‘inflation only’ increases from their local authorities for the past several years, but utility bills – so important in the

running of large facilities such as swimming pools and arts centres – have seen double-digit percentage increases.

5b) Funding the small-scale and the new.

Many of today's performers and artists, and many thriving arts organisations and museums, began with the provision of a modest grant from a local authority. A famous example is Sting, whose professional life began when he got a grant from Wallsend council to buy sound equipment – and which he subsequently repaid with generous donations to the local arts centre. The ebb and flow between the commercial and publicly funded sectors is well known, from Frank Finlay starting in Am Dram to Kevin Spacey at the Old Vic. It happens with people, with skills and with ideas – Ian Brown wrote a hit record directly inspired by an object in a museum. The point here is not that every teenager should get a council grant, but that new talent needs nurturing if it is to develop into an artistic or commercial success. It needs local, small-scale arts centres and performance spaces and small theatres in order to take the first steps, and often needs a tiny amount of seed capital.

6 What should happen next?

There are enough straws in the wind to tell us that something serious is happening, that we must take account of it, and that we must do something about it now, as we approach the annual round of local authority budget-setting. There will be voices claiming that there is nothing to worry about, because nationally there are plenty of cultural success stories. There are indeed many places where culture is thriving, but there are others where serious problems are looming. There will be other voices who say that the data is insufficient to cause concern. I agree that we need more and better information, but while we do something about that, we should not procrastinate. Yet others will dismiss this report as special pleading - but problems are usually spotted at an early stage by those closest to them. Their genuine concerns should not be dismissed as ‘anecdotes.’

In his book *The Perfect Storm*, the author Sebastien Junger explains how a set of three unrelated weather systems combined in an unpredictable way to create a tempest of cataclysmic force. Local authority spending on culture is currently caught up in a weather system of its own. New compulsory spending regimes are combining both with localised social and economic conditions, and with central government’s ability to cap council taxes to produce a situation where culture is under threat. Not only that, but the problems affecting culture will have a knock-on effect on other local services and national priorities. Local authorities would be shooting themselves in the foot if they neglect culture.

Some councils will sail through smooth waters, unaffected. But others – especially some County, Unitary and District Authorities, will be beset by crises. There is no national picture. What is obvious though, is that some local authorities are at their limits. Caught between the immovable objects of obligatory spending and limited resources, the inevitable result is that local authorities will make cuts in areas of discretionary expenditure. They have to do this, regardless of whether they want to, or whether their citizens want this to happen. The cracks are already starting to show.

Culture has failed to establish itself as something autonomous, as something to be supported in its own right, and it has failed in many places (though not all) to convince elected members that it helps address long-term issues across their range of responsibilities. In order to safeguard the future, elected

members need to appreciate the centrality of culture to their own concerns, and to the lives of the people who they represent. Central government needs to recognise that the structures that govern and influence culture at the local level are unwittingly leading to a dangerous situation. Museums, archives, theatres, concert halls, recreation fields, libraries, arts centres, historic buildings, sports clubs, tourism offices, tennis courts, gramophone societies, dance centres could disappear in some boroughs. More likely is the gradual erosion of cultural services - like climate change, a slow shift that eventually leads to problems that are difficult or impossible to reverse.

Several things are needed right now:

- A proper assessment of the situation to look at funding patterns, regulatory regimes and trends in order to provide greater clarity about the role and responsibilities of local authorities in culture. A major research exercise is needed to provide a solid basis for:
- A debate about reform. The current 'system' is a muddle, and while local distinctiveness and local autonomy are strengths, the current degree of opacity and complexity are weaknesses.
- Consideration needs to be given to making culture a statutory spending requirement.
- The weighting of culture in the CPA process (or its successor) needs to be reviewed to make cultural performance a significant factor in performance assessment.
- Research is needed to look at the place of culture within Local Area Agreements, so that cultural organisations understand the part that they can play, and the opportunities that are open to them.
- Elected members, local authority officers and central government must be made aware of the fact that they could do immense damage to the cultural life of this country by default.

As central government policy moves in the direction of greater autonomy at the local level, with a simplified regime of monitoring and inspection, the place of culture could become either more, or less, secure. As a set of mainly non-statutory services, often considered to be a means to other ends rather than a public good in its own right, culture looks very vulnerable. In some places the threat could take the form of a loss of facilities like libraries and paintings. In others, it could be a gradual withering by a thousand small cuts. But culture – parks, sport, libraries, theatres and the rest - should not be threatened anywhere at all in our twenty first century democracy.

Appendix – leisure and recreation spending by service type

Taken from CIPFA Statistical Information Service publications: *Leisure and Recreation Statistics Estimates* for 2001-2006 (CIPFA, London). Other further data taken from CIPFA Statistical Information Service publications: *Public Library Statistics (Actual Figures)*, for 2001-2005 (CIPFA, London) and CIPFA Statistical Information Service publications: *Archive Services Statistics Estimates* for 2002-2006 (CIPFA, London).

Estimated total revenue expenditure on *recreation and sport* per local authority type (x£1000)

	London boroughs	Metropolitan Districts	English Unitary Authorities	English Counties	English non-Met Districts	Total England	Wales	Total All Authorities
2001-02	74,270	148,769	107,851	7,805	278,038	616,733	69,132	
2002-03	82,168	158,195	95,845	9,657	257,043	602,908	72,179	675,087
2003-04	83,783	171,467	101,528	8,556	268,419	633,753	74,041	707,794
2004-05	76,012	175,309	100,991	71,108	280,055	639,475	81,075	720,550
2005-06	77,747	164,597	106,068	6,910	274,630	629,952	76,928	706,880

Estimated total revenue expenditure on *open spaces* per local authority type (x£1000)

	London boroughs	Metropolitan Districts	English Unitary Authorities	English Counties	English non-Met Districts	Total England	Wales	Total All Authorities
2001-02	92,931	148,105	91,020	35,884	170,724	538,664	30,298	568,962
2002-03	91,250	148,590	101,277	39,100	182,397	562,614	37,721	600,335
2003-04	103,657	177,878	107,007	42,301	197,833	628,676	38,594	667,270
2004-05	105,314	145,940	110,846	43,787	205,325	611,212	36,393	647,605
2005-06	101,827	161,542	115,465	47,849	206,428	633,111	41,673	674,784

Estimated total revenue expenditure on *tourism* per local authority type (x£1000)

	London boroughs	Metropolitan Districts	English Unitary Authorities	English Counties	English non-Met Districts	Total England	Wales	Total All Authorities
2001-02	847	11,218	19,201	5,085	43,599	79,950	6,823	86,773
2002-03	1,234	8,906	19,969	6,161	44,318	80,588	8,839	89,427
2003-04	1,008	9,089	20,844	6,981	46,079	84,001	9,109	93,110
2004-05	980	21,091	20,018	6,375	47,232	95,696	8,420	104,116
2005-06	890	11,722	22,194	7,471	42,633	84,910	10,244	95,154

Estimated total revenue expenditure on *museums and galleries* per local authority type (x£1000)

	London Boroughs	Metropolitan Districts	English Unitary Authorities	English Counties	English non-Met Districts	Total England	Wales	Total All Authorities
2001-02	7,229	39,513	32,494	15,889	34,205	129,330	6,907	136,237
2002-03	8,100	38,628	32,525	17,988	35,759	133,000	7,980	140,980
2003-04	8,495	38,930	36,941	19,541	39,059	142,966	9,316	152,282
2004-05	9,382	43,271	38,147	21,873	37,963	150,636	9,401	160,037
2005-06	18,034	47,439	42,191	23,350	46,236	177,250	15,269	192,519

Estimated total revenue expenditure on *theatres and public entertainment* per local authority type (x£1000)

	London boroughs	Metropolitan Districts	English Unitary Authorities	English Counties	English non-Met Districts	Total England	Wales	Total All Authorities
2001-02	28,851	14,237	19,483	2,045	45,207	109,823	6,782	116,605
2002-03	30,054	10,978	19,643	2,356	50,138	113,167	7,331	120,498
2003-04	27,434	13,819	13,183	2,157	44,664	101,257	8,368	109,625
2004-05	23,428	12,413	15,757	1,349	46,483	99,430	8,956	108,386
2005-06	9,531	14,400	22,264	2,084	41,100	89,399	9,420	98,819

Estimated total revenue expenditure on *arts development and support* per local authority type (x£1000)

	London boroughs	Metropolitan Districts	English Unitary Authorities	English Counties	English non-Met Districts	Total England	Wales	Total All Authorities
2001-02	14,280	14,660	19,483	2,045	45,207	109,823	6,907	136,237
2002-03	10,779	17,415	15,557	9,496	23,951	77,198	5,641	82,839
2003-04	12,847	18,171	16,824	9,739	24,161	81,742	5,783	87,525
2004-05	10,807	16,427	16,712	10,976	22,821	77,743	5,071	82,814
2005-06	14,882	15,131	18,744	9,797	20,605	79,159	4,432	83,591

Estimated total revenue expenditure on *heritage* per local authority type (x£1000)

	London boroughs	Metropolitan Districts	English Unitary Authorities	English Counties	English non-Met Districts	Total England	Wales	Total All Authorities
2001-02	6,740	1,690	1,385	3,269	2,494	15,578	984	16,562
2002-03	7,379	4,396	2,052	5,247	4,224	23,298	493	23,791
2003-04	6,043	5,094	2,645	6,121	4,733	24,636	666	25,302
2004-05	4,794	1,909	3,354	6,114	4,059	20,230	880	21,110
2005-06	2,327	3,454	3,495	5,864	3,697	18,837	2,074	20,911

Estimated total revenue expenditure on *museums and galleries, theatres and public entertainment, arts development and support and heritage* per local authority type (x£1000)

	London boroughs	Metropolitan Districts	English Unitary Authorities	English Counties	English non-Met Districts	Total England	Wales	Total All Authorities
2001-02	57,100	70,100	71,324	28,862	104,454	331,840	18,471	350,311
2002-03	56,312	71,417	69,777	35,087	114,070	346,663	21,445	368,108
2003-04	54,998	77,562	70,914	38,119	114,157	355,750	24,169	379,919
2004-05	48,580	75,799	74,218	40,877	113,141	352,615	24,736	377,351
2005-06	44,774	80,424	86,714	41,095	111,638	364,645	31,195	395,840

Estimated total revenue expenditure on *leisure and recreation* per local authority type (x£1000)

	London boroughs	Metropolitan Districts	English Unitary Authorities	English Counties	English non-Met districts	Total England	Wales	Total All Authorities
2001-02	225,148	378,192	289,396	77,636	596,815	1,567,187	124,724	1,691,911
2002-03	230,964	387,108	286,868	90,005	597,828	1,592,773	140,184	1,732,957
2003-04	243,446	435,996	300,293	95,957	626,488	1,702,180	145,913	1,848,093
2004-05	230,886	418,139	306,073	98,147	645,753	1,698,998	150,624	1,849,622
2005-06	225,238	418,285	330,441	103,325	635,329	1,712,618	16,040	1,872,658

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