

Briefing Paper 68

The role of grassroots arts activities in communities: a scoping study

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This study is presented as part of the Arts and Humanities Research Council's 'Connected Communities' research theme. It's a theme that is supported by the range of Research Councils in the areas of the arts, humanities, social sciences as well as the material sciences, new technology and medicine. The expressed purpose of the research that is being produced is to – 'mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health and well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities.' In other words to provide information to help communities get better at what they do. *We have been looking here at what voluntary arts organisations do, how they do it and what the benefits of the work are for individuals and communities.*

At the core of the programme is research to understand the changing nature of communities, in their historical and cultural contexts, and the value of communities in

sustaining and enhancing our quality of life. This better understanding will also inform the development of more effective community based interventions to address key economic and social challenges. Engagement with communities at all stages of the research is a key feature of the work.

The programme seeks to connect research expertise and data relevant to communities from across the research base in order to develop a more holistic understanding of community life rather than tackling issues in isolation.

The whole process is challenging definitions of what communities are and how they work especially in the light cast by new technology and the potential for new community connectedness that this brings. The challenges are considerable - how do we maintain individual rights and aspirations and include them in a developing sense of community?

Voluntary arts groups are part of the wider social connectedness of community whilst bringing their own, often determinedly



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idiosyncratic, activity to the ecology of arts work in Great Britain. The research, if it is to be of value, should help you as voluntary arts groups understand what you do and perhaps even get better at it.

Voluntary arts organisations in Great Britain form a natural and very productive focus for a study like this. The activity is varied in content, the levels of voluntariness are high and the achievement of these organisations in artistic, creative, technical and other terms is significant. They bring groups of people together creating communities of shared interest and skill development.

The study has been produced jointly by researchers from the Universities of Exeter, Birmingham and Glamorgan. Voluntary Arts have provided guidance and material help throughout the project and their involvement led directly to the [Growing the Grass Roots event](#)¹ on 18 October 2011. A significant part of the research activity has been to explore and establish what is already widely known about the value of voluntary arts and to see where this points for the future.

Underpinning the commission is a strong body of reported belief that arts activity, grounded in community participation, contributes significantly to the wider objectives of Government, local authorities and communities themselves in developing the capacity of our civil society. This study has intended to evaluate such general beliefs by developing rigorous research evidence derived from a research methodology which engaged directly with the beneficiaries of such activities in the

community. The aim is to build on the scoping study to develop a more participatory project working directly with voluntary arts groups to discover more about their views of the benefits of participation in the voluntary arts.

We have produced an overview and analysis of available and relevant evidence about the voluntary arts sector. A study of this kind derives enormous benefit from work that has been conducted elsewhere and an important element of the methodology is a review of current literature. International evidence for the impact of arts-based activities on the maintenance and regeneration of communities has been examined and is included in the report. The overwhelming conclusion from that body of literature is that arts based practice does indeed make a very significant and positive contribution to the development of the attributes of Civil Society. Civil Society refers to the arena of uncoerced activity around shared interests, purposes and values.

It is difficult to separate reports, surveys and other information that deal with the purely voluntary arts sector from other arts activities with a base in communities. These include professionally led community arts organisations. The voluntary arts sector supports locally based cultural activity which largely pre-dates the 'instrumental' interventions of the community arts movement, arts and health, arts and regeneration and other self-conscious arts activity that takes place in social contexts. In this sense the voluntary arts lead the participatory arts in Great Britain.

The following areas briefly identify the major issues emerging from the literature

¹ See <http://tsrc.ac.uk/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=ty3pbRFGMM%3d&tabid=844>

review and place them in the wider context of the principle social policy areas associated with the process.

Social impact - personal and community development

Participation in cultural and sporting activities has been shown to result in gaining new skills, improving informal and formal learning, increasing self-confidence, self-esteem and a feeling of self-worth, improving or creating social networks, enhancing quality of life, promoting social cohesion, personal and community empowerment, improving personal and local image, identity and a sense of well-being. For example, all of the above personal and social aspects can occur within ethnic minority groups. In addition, participation in cultural activities relating to their own culture can result in an enhanced sense of pride within, and 'empowerment' of the community. For disabled people, participation can reduce isolation, increase social networks and enhance quality of life. The social connectedness provided by voluntary arts activity can bring significant health benefits to older participants.

Education

Research studies have shown that there is an association between cultural possessions in the home and educational performance; that there is a link between cultural participation and increased literacy and that participation in music and visual arts is linked to being above average in reading, maths and behaviour.

It is believed by educators that arts activities and creativity in education have a positive educational impact on the majority of pupils.

Participation in arts education can lead to not only the development of arts and knowledge skills, but to increased confidence and the development of communication skills, an understanding of diversity and transferable skills for future employment.

Various quantitative research projects have provided information on the level and extent of participation by the general population in culture, the arts and sport. Such studies have shown that certain groups are under-represented in participation in the arts. These groups include the disabled, the elderly and demographic groups in the lower economic range.

The gaps in knowledge

The study we have undertaken has revealed many gaps in the available information about the voluntary arts sector and these gaps point to further work that needs to be undertaken. The gaps include:

- **Data collection:** research on participation (and therefore non-participation) and views and attitudes to culture needs to be carried out on a large-scale, consistent basis, so that information can be disaggregated at least to local authority level
- **Longitudinal studies:** very few longitudinal studies are available to inform the assessment of the social and economic impact of cultural and sport initiatives, programmes and major events over the medium to long term. There is a need to measure beyond the immediate social and economic impact of voluntary cultural initiatives, programmes and activity.

- Under-represented groups: more research needs to be carried out, particularly at a national level on attitudes held and behavioural reasons behind non-participation by some groups in cultural activities. Guidance for the cultural agencies on how to promote inclusion could be drawn from examples of good practice.
- Well-being and quality of life: more research should be undertaken on the definition, analysis and measurement of the concepts of 'well-being' and 'quality of life', as often they are cited as the outcomes of participation in arts and cultural activities.
- Arts and Health: there is a need for a more formal outcome evaluation of the role of arts in health, with many projects being too small-scale for rigorous analysis. There is also a need, where appropriate, for the social and economic impact of the benefits of arts interventions in healthcare to be assessed, with financial savings to the National Health Service demonstrated by economically evaluating the beneficial impact to patients' health.
- Employment: there has been little research or evaluation of projects or programmes in terms of promoting access to employment in the creative industries. Research has demonstrated that participation in arts activities at school can

develop transferable skills for the workplace, but there is little evidence on the actual employment effect and no work at all directly with voluntary arts organisations.

- Art for its own sake: there is a need for research on the social impact of art itself. Research on the intrinsic nature of art and its capacity to provide meaning to different individuals and different cultures would assist art providers to better understand what art means to target audiences and perhaps encourage more participation and attendance.
- Monitoring and Evaluation: various evaluation toolkits are available through certain voluntary organisations; however, there is a clear gap in the availability of a consistent, common evaluation framework which can be used by voluntary arts groups to assess their impact.

The future

The workshops convened at the Growing the Grass Roots event on 18 October 2011 provided us with an opportunity to explore how the gaps in information could be filled. A report on the day is available at www.tsrc.ac.uk. We are also bidding for further funds that will enable us to develop methods to collect robust and reliable data about the voluntary arts sector.



This paper is part of the Third Sector Research Centre – Briefing Paper Series see www.tsrc.ac.uk for more details and a copy of the full Working Paper 68.

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