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R E P O R T

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# Arts debate

## Perceptions and impact

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Prepared for Arts Council England

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# Summary

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In 2006 and 2007 Arts Council England ran a large inquiry that it called ‘the arts debate’. The arts debate included research and consultative processes aimed at finding out what people value most about the arts and what principles they think should guide publicly funded organisations. The Arts Council intends to use its own analysis of the findings of the arts debate to inform its mission, strategy, priorities and plans.

RAND Europe was commissioned by Arts Council England to assist the Arts Council to gather and summarise information about perceptions of the impact and processes of the arts debate thus far. The Council intends to use this information to test some of its early thinking on how to respond to the findings of the debate. This short report is based on interviews that RAND Europe conducted with eleven arts debate participants and Arts Council stakeholders in January 2008. This small sample of selected informants was not representative of the whole population of arts debate participants. The Arts Council was seeking qualitative feedback, independently reported, from a group of prominent individuals whom they regarded as thoughtful, knowledgeable, and belonging to key stakeholder groups. To encourage frankness and protect possibly sensitive information, it was agreed that the underlying data from the interviews would not be made available to the Council or the public, and that no individuals or organisations would be associated with particular points of view described in the report.

The interviewees were identified by the Arts Council. The questions for interviewees were prepared jointly by the Arts Council and RAND Europe. The interviewees included heads of several regularly funded arts organisations, a chief executive of an Arts Council England region, a member of the Arts Council’s national Council, a senior official from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), a local authority chief executive, a member of the arts debate advisory panel, and a senior specialist in cultural policy at a university. Interviewees contributed positive and critical comments about the arts debate processes; they also commented on opportunities arising from the arts debate and raised other issues.

## **Main messages**

The two main messages that emerged from the interviews were that:

- interviewees felt positive about the process of the arts debate. They would like to see some form of dialogue continue, involving the Arts Council, its direct constituents (individual artists and arts organisations) and, if possible,

representatives of the general public. They also generally approved the set of goals identified by the Council for itself, although they did not feel that the Council had been specific enough about how it would go about achieving those goals

- there was scepticism about whether the Council would change any of its processes or its decisions based on the findings of the debate. This scepticism was reinforced by what the interviewees perceived to be the very unfortunate timing of the recent funding allocation announcements, which lacked connection to ideas from the arts debate, and the publication of the McMaster review

Other key challenges for the Arts Council to consider, which some interviewees raised, include:

- the unresolved dichotomy between excellence and access, and the implications of placing greater focus on the quality of experience of those who use or consume the art
- the call to include artists in setting the agenda, but without becoming too swayed by their self-interest

### **Positive comments**

Interviewees generally spoke positively about the breadth and openness of the design and conduct of the arts debate. They made positive comments about:

- the availability of opportunities for them to express their views during the debate
- the arts debate team's responsiveness to comments about the processes
- the bravery of the Council in undertaking a potentially risky initiative (the arts debate might have revealed a lack of support for the arts or for the Arts Council)
- the professionalism of the organisation and facilitation of the events they attended
- the liveliness of the sessions and topicality of the discussions

### **Critical comments**

Interviewees tended to be concerned about:

- the Arts Council's poor handling of public relations and media communications, leading to a lack of visibility among arts organisations, individual artists, and the general public, and missed opportunities to reach out to stakeholders during and after the debate
- the Council's own internal commitment to the arts debate
- the lack of an explicit connection between the priorities for action that the Council identified as arising from the arts debate, and the Council's most recent funding decisions
- the debate's emphasis on the policies and responsibilities of the Arts Council as opposed to what people want from the arts and artists

## Opportunities

Several interviewees saw the arts debate as the possible beginning of a continuing engagement between the Council and individual artists, arts organisations, other arts funders, the government and the general public.

## Other issues arising from the Arts debate

Interviewees identified the following issues as arising from the arts debate:

- the arts debate illuminated the prospect of the Council becoming primarily a development agency for all the arts, rather than solely a funding body dealing with certain arts organisations. Some interviewees noted ways in which this would significantly change its relationships with the organisations it funds
- a number of interviewees wanted the Arts Council to engage artists more constructively in dialogue and negotiation in the future
- maximizing the quality of the experience of audience members may be a more appropriate focus for the Council than either promoting excellence or improving access. Interviewees observed that high quality experiences are what keep people coming back to the arts, and they produce the instrumental benefits (such as jobs and economic growth) that politicians seem to value most
- the timing of the publication of the findings from the arts debate and the announcement of the Arts Council's most recent decisions on funding arts organisations was very close. According to a number of interviewees, the effect of media coverage of the funding decisions was to overshadow the arts debate, and to reveal an apparent lack of connection between the messages from the arts debate and the basis for the funding decisions
- interviewees thought the arts debate has also been overshadowed by the publication of the McMaster review in January 2008. Some interviewees thought that, for those who have not been closely involved in the debate, the McMaster review would completely eclipse it. Some interviewees questioned why coordination of the timing for the McMaster review had not been handled better by DCMS and the Arts Council, since they saw some of McMaster's suggestions as contradicting the arts debate's findings. In particular, while the debate indicated an enhanced role for the public in decision making, McMaster appears to minimize that role.