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TECHNICAL REPORT

Vital Communities

Review and analysis of the
research

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Prepared for the Vital Communities Partners

The research described in this report was commissioned by the Vital Communities Partners.

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Published 2008 by the RAND Corporation
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Executive summary

What is the Vital Communities programme?

The Vital Communities programme provides creative and artistic activities for children, their families and wider communities in nine locations across Cambridgeshire and in Peterborough. The project commenced in Autumn 2005, and between November 2005 and December 2006 a total of 187 creative practitioners/deliverers organised 747 events and workshops. These events were attended by a total of 13,968 people, of whom 10,103 were children and 3,865 were adults.¹ Vital Communities is also a research project that aims to generate evidence of positive impacts of the arts on individuals and the wider community.

The design of the Vital Communities programme

The arts have often been associated with beneficial effects and impacts; however, the measurement and quantification of these effects appears to be a more recent preoccupation. Vital Communities builds upon previous research conducted in the field of the social impacts of the arts by stating that 'Vital Communities is ... a long-term study that sets out to investigate the impact of arts on communities and to demonstrate whether the arts have a positive impact on the aspirations, achievements and attitudes of those communities'.²

Vital Communities claims to be unique because of four elements in its design: it provides evidence of the impact of its arts programme on communities; provides qualitative measurement of its effects; combines this with quantitative measurement of its effects; and adopts longitudinal focus. A selective search of the literature on arts impact studies suggests that:

- some other projects do employ one or more of the design elements above
- probably no other project currently combines two or more of the elements in the same way as Vital Communities.

¹ Data provided by Vital Communities in F1-Quantitative Data October 2005–December 2006.

² Vital Communities (2006) *Business Plan: Pilot Phase 2005/7* p.3.

Therefore, although Vital Communities is probably not a unique project in an absolute sense, it appears to be **distinctive** in aiming to combine all the elements above in the way it does.

Quantitative data on the effects of Vital Communities

The main source of quantitative data available to examine the possible impacts of Vital Communities activities on participants and the wider community is a report by Business of Culture. The Business of Culture research project³ set out to report on the wider social impacts of the Vital Communities arts projects on participating children, their families and their communities. However, our analysis raises serious concerns about the quality of the baseline measurements in that report, the low attendance at community discussion groups, and the high rate of attrition on participant diary returns. These quality concerns mean that the Business of Culture report and data do not enable robust conclusions to be drawn regarding the effects of Vital Communities. Vital Communities also generated quantitative data on numbers of participants attending a range of events.

Qualitative data on the effects of Vital Communities

RAND Europe analysed a wide range of qualitative data related to the project, most of it generated by participants and the project's administrators. This information included: notebooks produced by the participating artists; records of termly evaluation meetings; parents' statements on their impressions of the project; and evaluation forms submitted by teachers and artists in three locations: Peterborough, Ramsey and Fulbourn (see Appendix A). We have picked up a wide variety of messages from the evaluation forms regarding the possible impacts and effects of the Vital Communities activities. It is, however, problematic to make generalisations from these messages because they consist of anecdotal evidence from which firm, objective and definitive conclusions cannot be drawn. Anecdotal evidence can hint at possible positive associations between factors, yet to claim the existence of effects on the basis of this evidence would generalise beyond the possibilities offered by the data. The value of anecdotal evidence can be increased by 'triangulating' it against other sources, to check for corroboration, but such sources were mostly not available for the data we received.

Evaluation forms were designed and collated by the Vital Communities project manager as a means of internally evaluating the creative programme only, rather than for external research purposes. Furthermore, given the rotation of artists and the fact that class teachers do move on, it is very difficult to assess temporal changes: there is no sustained consistent analysis, nor is there a baseline against which effects can be measured. In addition, the wording of the questions on the evaluation forms raises concerns about the reliability of the data. The statements derived from these evaluation forms should therefore be treated with caution.

³ Business of Culture (2007) *Vital Communities: Research Report* London: Business of Culture.

Nevertheless, the evaluation forms do raise many interesting issues regarding the apparent associations between different elements of the programme and reported effects. Given that these apparent associations were interesting in their own right, we have included an analysis of the issues to which they relate.

Conclusion and recommendations

The future progress of the project depends, obviously, on attracting sufficient funding, but also on applying the methodological and conceptual recommendations arising from the first phase. These are to:

- Expand the baseline analysis. Incorporating in the research arts interests and participation in the arts by the active and control families would generate very important information required to evaluate any changes in attitudes and behaviour.
- Shift the focus from causal relations to associations. This may make the research methodology more robust because a focus on causal relations is complicated, and causal relations are difficult to prove.
- Use effective data collection methods and ensure cooperation of research participants. Attrition has been substantial and further stages of the research design could incorporate strategies to prevent attrition and increase participation.

We also highlight many substantive questions arising from the qualitative data that could form the basis for future research projects.