Councillor briefing pack
Cultural commissioning
“Culture is a resilient sector with a reputation for embracing new ways of working, forging partnerships and thinking differently. I have been extremely encouraged by the relationships cultural services and organisations up and down the country have developed with local commissioners. The Cultural Commissioning Programme, which the LGA is pleased to support, has played a valuable role helping culture to participate effectively in local commissioning conversations. The cultural sector has a powerful offer to make. There is a growing body of evidence about how participation in culture can improve wellbeing, develop an individual’s resilience and help to strengthen a sense of community. In the context of continued austerity, it is even more important that we do everything we can to prevent costly health and social care expenditure. This guide for councillors will help to equip local cultural leaders to articulate the wider benefits culture can deliver and make the case to local commissioners.”

Councillor Ian Stephens
Chair LGA Culture, Tourism and Sport Board

“Arts and cultural activities bring pleasure and enjoyment for people of all backgrounds. They are also a great asset for other areas of public service, making a real difference to the health and wellbeing, opportunities and aspirations of individuals and communities with particular needs. I encourage members and officers across all local authority services to explore how they can work with arts and cultural organisations in their localities to enhance quality of life and reduce demand on other services.”

Councillor Mike Hill OBE
Cabinet Member for Community Services
Kent County Council

Councillor briefing pack: cultural commissioning

Key facts

Businesses in the UK arts and culture industry generated an aggregate turnover of £12.4 billion in 2011. The social and economic value provided by the sector is supported by a range of evidence.

In England, costs of treating people with long term-term conditions accounts for 70 per cent of NHS’s annual expenditure (2014 estimates) while costs of mental health problems to the economy in England is £105 billion per annum (2011 estimates).

Many arts and cultural organisations deliver programmes which transform traditional approaches to service delivery in fields such as mental health, wellbeing, adult social care, education and skills, community cohesion and regeneration.

Evidence highlights the role that arts and cultural organisations play in supporting resilience and independence in individuals, and fostering stronger communities, leading to reduced demand on other public service.

What is cultural commissioning?

Cultural commissioning refers to commissioning of arts organisations, museums, library services and heritage organisations to deliver public services outcomes. It is an asset-based approach which taps into the energies and expertise of the cultural sector to enhance lives, secure better health and wellbeing, develop skills and employability, and build stronger towns and neighbourhoods.

Why it matters

Arts and cultural organisations are well-placed to deliver outcomes which councils want. At a time when preventing the need for expensive interventions further down the line is key, they can help build healthy and happy communities in ways that are empowering and cost effective. Many arts and cultural organisations find that being commissioned to deliver outcomes strengthens their relationships with other public services and helps diversify their funding sources, at a time when grant aid is reducing.

What difference can taking action make?

Arts and cultural organisations often have strong connections with local communities and good understanding of local need. They can engage people in a way that sustains interest since their activities are creative, sociable, and do not stigmatise. A growing body of evidence points to their effectiveness in enabling wellbeing, tackling social inclusion and helping to build places which are liveable and attractive to investors and employers.

**Liveable towns and neighbourhoods**
Many councils use cultural spaces and programmes as a catalyst for better towns and neighbourhoods – deploying them to improve the image of localities, to retain skilled people and draw in new investors.

**Health and wellbeing**
People who take part in arts and cultural activities are physically and mentally active, helping to prevent the development of long term conditions.

**Reducing isolation and strengthening communities**
Engagement in cultural activities connects people and communities, helps bridge cultural differences and fosters understanding and relationships.

**Learning and skills**
Arts and cultural programmes can inspire and open up new horizons – encouraging enquiry and learning. They can enable technical and vocational skills which are transferable to other employments.

**Citizen engagement**
Participation in performances, events and reminiscence programmes provides a voice for individuals and communities – and can be particularly empowering for people with learning difficulties or living with other challenges. They can help policy makers and commissioners hear from people they haven’t connected with before. Libraries have strong reach into local communities while museums and heritage services can use their collections and spaces to engage with people.

What role can you play as an elected member?

**Leadership**
Councillors can talk with local arts and cultural organisations about how they can champion the sector’s role in enhancing quality of life and engaging with local communities. They can influence others at senior level to help them see how the council can make the most of its cultural assets.

**Enabling relationships within the council**
Councillors can encourage arts and cultural organisations to build relationships with other services – such as adult social care, family and children’s services, public health, regeneration. To do so, they will need to consider how their work contributes to the outcomes these services need, and the added value they can bring.

**Enabling relationships beyond the council**
Councillors can encourage arts and cultural organisations to develop relationships with bodies with which the local authority works. As above, understanding how their work contributes to broader outcomes is key. If their work supports health and wellbeing outcomes, they could explore opportunities to secure commissions with local clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) and providers of health and social care. Some CCGs will grant aid, rather than commission, where they see there is value to be gained from smaller providers.

Some Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) have plans to grow employment in creative and cultural industries and may be open to proposals. Schools and school clusters are an important partner for many arts and cultural organisations – local Bridge organisations are funded by Arts Council England to help the arts and cultural sector partner with young people within and outside of education.
Supporting delivery
Councillors can help ensure plans are in place to support and develop the cultural sector, and are aligned with corporate priorities. Some councils have developed a cultural strategy as their overarching plan for the sector.

Scrutiny
Councillors can ask questions to ensure that plans are realised, outcomes are measured, and that best use is being made of local cultural assets.

How it’s done
Secure advice and support from external bodies
Encourage your council to develop relationships with external bodies such as Arts Council England, who can support and advise. Ensure that arts and cultural provision is included in discussions of the health and wellbeing board, council for voluntary services, rural community council, and others.

The local council for voluntary services may already sit on the health and wellbeing board – enabling it to make the case for the sector’s value. It may also help the voluntary sector build links with commissioners. Ask whether it could also build links with local arts and cultural organisations, so that it can support and represent their interests as well.

Influence other council services to use arts and cultural providers in their commissioning
Encourage those responsible for services such as adults, children and families, public health and regeneration, to consider how arts and cultural providers might contribute to their outcomes and include them in market engagement events. If they have plans for letting high value tenders, encourage them to write in requirements for prime contractors to sub-contract with arts and cultural providers which can deliver community engagement or social value which a large provider may find hard to deliver.

Where council departments have commissioned arts and cultural providers on a project basis, ask them to consider how they can move to working with them on longer term commissions to help limit the risk to smaller providers.

Consortium working
Encourage local arts and cultural providers to work together to build capacity and profile for commissioning. Sharing out representation at commissioner market engagement events is one way of doing this. Another is developing a database of local arts and cultural organisations so that commissioners know how to contact them. Those responsible for arts and cultural provision in the council may be able to help bring consortia together to do this work.

Procurement teams
Liaise with senior officers in the council to ensure that procurement processes do not deter smaller providers. Procurement processes are important in helping councils manage risk but should not stifle opportunities for innovation.

Work with other councils
In areas with two tier authorities, councillors across county and districts or boroughs can come together to see how the whole map of cultural provision can be used to build a healthier, happier locality. This can lead to fresh approaches that make best use of assets and resources.
Case studies

Manchester City Council has embedded arts and cultural activities into the city’s approach to complex dependency. Over a number of years, with the help of the council’s culture team, strong relationships have developed between the city’s arts and cultural organisations and public services, including the city’s Mental Health & Social Care Trust and its public health team. This is helping the council to address goals, such as reducing levels of worklessness, tackling low skills, improving health outcomes, tackling domestic abuse and reducing levels of safeguarding demand.


Bath and North-East Somerset Council commissions arts organisation Creativity Works to deliver its Mental Health Creative Support Service. This offers people experiencing anxiety, depression or other mental health issues a chance to build confidence, learn new skills and make new friends. Participants can join a variety of free weekly creative groups, from ‘photography and rambling’ to ‘writing space’. If participants want groups to continue, Creativity Works helps them take the steps to independence, assisting with the practicalities of budgets and planning. Creativity Works remains on hand to provide support, but independence is the goal.


Devon County Council is one of many local authorities which commissions its library service to deliver a Reading Well Books on Prescription service, to improve health and wellbeing. Books can be prescribed by GPs or other health professionals but are also available for self-referrals. It is part of a national scheme, delivered by the Reading Agency and the Society of Chief Librarians, which work with the Royal Colleges of GPs, Nursing and Psychiatrists, the British Psychological Society, IAPT and others, to develop a quality assured book list. Research by Devon Public Health shows that the scheme is reaching its targeted socio-economic groups.


Policy background

Social Value Act, 2012
www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2012/3/enacted

Requires public bodies to consider choosing providers based on social value created, and not just on cost alone, for contracts above EU procurement thresholds.

Care Act, 2015

Places overall wellbeing of individuals at the forefront of their care and support, including physical and mental health, access to employment, education and social opportunities.

NHS – Five Year Forward View, 2014
www.england.nhs.uk/ourwork/futurenhs/

Emphasises need for preventative approaches to secure better health, and importance of partnerships between health sector, local authorities, voluntary sector and local communities.

2015 Procurement Regulations

Includes measures to make public procurement more accessible for small and medium size enterprises, which includes most arts and cultural providers.

Further information

The cultural commissioning programme, funded by Arts Council England, has collated resources, toolkits and sources of evidence of the impact of arts and culture on public service outcomes:
www.ncvo.org.uk/practical-support/public-services/cultural-commissioning-programme/resources

Arts Council England champions, develops and invests in artistic and cultural experiences that enrich people’s lives:
http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/

Summary of evidence for the value of arts and cultural activities to the economy, health and wellbeing, society and education—The value of arts and culture to people and society—an evidence review – Arts Council England, 2014

Engaging with health and wellbeing boards: www.compactvoice.org.uk/sites/default/files/engaging_with_health_and_wellbeing_boards.pdf

Engaging with CCGs: www.compactvoice.org.uk/sites/default/files/engaging_with_clinical_commissioning_groups.pdf

National Arts and Health Alliance: www.artshealthandwellbeing.org.uk/recent-developments/national-alliance-arts-health-and-wellbeing

National Alliance for Museums, Health and Wellbeing: museumsandwellbeingalliance.wordpress.com

Bridge Organisations – funded by Arts Council England to connect children and young people, schools and communities with art and culture: http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/cyp/bridge-organisations/

The LGAs procurement and commissioning resources http://www.local.gov.uk/productivity

The Cultural Commissioning Programme is delivered by a partnership of NCVO (lead partner), NEF (New Economics Foundation) and NPC (New Philanthropy Capital).