

DCMS Review of Arts Council England

Spotlight responded to the DCMS Review of Arts Council England (ACE). In its outline for the Review, DCMS explained that it intended to stimulate a national conversation about the future of Arts Council England and how creativity is nurtured and developed in the future.

As part of that review, respondents were asked to look at the Arts Council's mandate, set out in its Royal Charter, its purpose and structure, investment principles and Let's Create Strategy.

Spotlight did not respond to every question in the consultation, and instead focused on outlining the need for the Arts Council to consider performers more in what they do and how they invest, particularly the need to ensure the sustainability of those working professionals in their funded organisations who deliver creative vision through performance. We considered that the Arts Council mandate should be expanded to include sustainability so that it would read 'knowledge, understanding, sustainability and practice of the arts'.

When considering the Let's Create Strategy, Spotlight considered that of all the identified objectives, the requirement for a 'creative and cultural country' was most important to our subscribers because it means that wherever they are based within England, there should be opportunities for them to showcase their skills and talents.

We went on to note that the first outcome in the Creative Strategy is 'creative people'. We considered that to be a difficult outcome to support without further clarification. Certainly, it is important that everyone has the opportunity to explore creativity and to experience creative products, both as a means of self expression and skills development. However, there is no distinction for creative workers who are working professionally and need to be supported with a professional infrastructure. Without an understanding or appreciation of that distinction, we would argue that ACE is reducing creativity to 'hobbyfication' and not recognising skilled individuals earning a living.

We also considered that sustainability should be included in the investment principles. The sector is nothing without the individuals that deliver the work and in order for them to do so, their careers must be sustainable. This then provides added value back through experience and employability which enriches the offer provided by the sector and encourages more private investment and development.

When responding to questions about the Arts Council's purpose and structure, we argued that Spotlight would like to see an increased focus on supporting performers develop sustainable careers, which should also help tackle class barriers in the arts. While live performances

through theatre and dance are only two parts of the arts relevant to our subscribers covered by ACE, often the focus on investment and developing cultural practice is focused on buildings or specific projects without consideration of the need for performers to deliver that artistic work. A recognition in its mandate of a distinction between a visual artist and a performer that ACE considers both would be an important step to provide more consideration of performers in cultural works and also encourage ACE to address issues regarding the health of performing in the sector, such as pay inequalities and back stage safety.

The consultation asked responders to consider what the Arts Council's role should be in promoting and supporting technological innovation across the arts and culture sectors. To this question, we responded that we believed that ACE should be championing the rights of those working in the creative sector, which should include the moral and performer rights of actors. Promotion and support of technological innovation at the expense of these rights should be rejected and ACE should work with the sector to ensure that it reinforces the concerns and protections necessary to ensure that those rights are not lost in the pursuit of global competitiveness.

When looking at the relationship between ACE and Government, we considered that there should be limited involvement in ACE by Government or Local Authorities and that they should have nearly no influence on funding decisions.

The final part of the consultation looked at the challenges facing the cultural sector over the next ten years. We responded that there were a number of challenges facing our sector. AI development is certainly a challenge, whether it is concerning new writing or the use of creative products in unlicensed material. Theatre is not immune from either of those issues and ACE should be engaging with the sector and performers around how they can be supported as we navigate those challenges facing them.

As mentioned above, Spotlight also has real concerns about career sustainability for professional performers without support. Our sector has worked hard to improve accessibility for people from different backgrounds, both class and ethnicity, and that success is shown in our creative offer on stage and screen. However, sustaining a career as a performer can be challenging without an appropriate level of income. A recent study by the British Equity Collecting Society (October 2024) showed that performing is a privileged profession with 52.7% of primary occupation professionals coming from a household background associated with the highest income. This is reflected in the fact that the typical median annual earnings for a performer as a primary occupation is less than the minimum wage. This is even more dire for performers that identify themselves as disabled earning less than half of the earnings of a performer who identifies as able bodied. This needs to be addressed and should be part of the conversation with those sectors engaging with ACE who employ performers to deliver their creative works.

Finally, there has been anecdotal evidence and now formal research by SOLT/UK Theatre (February 2025), that shows that the UK theatre stock is in need of significant capital investment

in order for it to be fit for purpose going forward. Without safe venues that are fit for purpose, there will be no ability for performers to work and there will be a further decrease in domestic theatre creative products.

In our response we also identified what we considered were the most important things Arts Council England should focus on. We believed that a priority for ACE should be developing policies for ACE funding and National Lottery money that embrace all those working in the live arts, including performers. These policies should be sector specific and have regard for all those working within the sector, not just those in receipt of those funds. ACE has a responsibility to provide a bridge between the sector and the Government, providing advice and understanding that will help shape Government policy and ensure that it is informed by real information coming from the sector it impacts. There should be greater dialogue and engagement between ACE and those who work in the sector and it should be committed to producing sector specific and critical research that helps inform its own choices for funding. As part of that there should be greater conversations with the sector as a whole about the issues facing them, beyond the employers and trade unions.

As for what changes to ACE we would like to see, we said that it should have individual sector policies again so that each area has a dedicated plan to deal with their needs and development within the overarching aims of the organisation. Theatre for example, has distinct structural, safety and engagement concerns that are distinct from the visual arts or literature. Without the ability to engage and then communicate with the sector about any research or understanding it has of the needs of that sector, how does ACE truly deliver on its mandate? For Spotlight subscribers, the concern is that without having a nuanced understanding of the sector that impacts on them (theatre) and without that, how can ACE ever really address their needs or encourage practices that make their employment fulfilling, safe or sustainable.