



## **A study of Community Engagement Workers in the Arts, in London**

### Executive Summary

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## 1.1 Background

A new practice seems to be emerging in the cultural sector. It draws on hybrid techniques of marketing, arts education and community development. "Community Engagement", is a practice which invests in the community whilst also furthering the interests and objectives of an established cultural provider. Practitioners set out to build strong relationships with communities that often have little or no history of cultural participation, and to develop projects to overcome the barriers individuals in these communities face.

Workers in this area are finding themselves pioneers in a new kind of territory. Entry, progression and professional recognition for their skills are not standardised, and there is little understanding among others, inside or outside their organisations, about what makes make a good or a bad community engagement worker.

This report set out to shed light on this emerging area, in order to better understand what practitioners view as good practice, to increase awareness of the benefits of community engagement practice in the arts and to explore the ways in which practitioners may be better supported in their roles in future.

The research took place primarily through qualitative interviews with a small sample of 14 London-based practitioners, combined with questionnaires about their work, careers and organisations. Desk research also took place to explore the wider policy context and relevant practice in other sectors.

## 1.2 Key themes

Key themes of community engagement practice in the cultural sector emerged from the research as follows:

- **Building relationships** is at the heart of community engagement, and effective communication and joined-up thinking is needed at every level of an organisation in order to maximise its impact
- Community engagement practitioners work in a challenging and **resource-intensive** environment, and need better **recognition and opportunities** to support their work
- **Training and other forms of professional development** are needed both to formalise and extend practitioners' existing skills, and must be highly flexible to recognise the diverse demands of working in the community
- Better **networking** between cultural providers and between the voluntary, cultural and private sectors would provide further support for community engagement workers and more opportunities for their clients

## 1.3 Summary of findings

### 1.3.1 Practitioners

Community engagement workers are 'change agents' challenging perceptions about the arts, their organisations and participants' attitudes towards themselves and their potential. They work with limited resources and have to deal with wide-ranging and not always complementary stakeholder interests. Though not necessarily employed as managers, they are often responsible for freelance artists, volunteers, ambassadors and key community and stakeholder relationships.

Key personal qualities of practitioners are flexibility, an ability to learn on the job, and an entrepreneurial, people-oriented style of working. Lateral thinking and flexibility are essential as local dynamics and relationships shift. Practitioners are likely to be practical and pragmatic with a strong sense of social purpose, a strong interest in people, social justice and the potential for transformation through the arts.

#### **Entry, progression and professional development:**

Practitioners emerge from a range of employment backgrounds, mostly connected with the arts and often including some casual work. Most practitioners are graduates. New engagement workers seem likely to be either entry-level arts workers, community-oriented workers from other sectors, artists interested in the social side of arts work, or entry-level workers from a community background. Many have never formally considered this work before discovering it. Of the interviewees several of the posts were either new or had no job descriptions when the workers were recruited. A personal experience of exclusion may inform the participants' work.

Practitioners have a high level of commitment, and in general aspire to continue their current work but with an increased salary and resources. Progression routes are currently unclear, with many perceiving a 'glass ceiling'. Increased responsibility and effectiveness in this field is not formally recognised, and short-term project funding exacerbates the limited opportunities for ongoing career development and progression.

#### **Training needs:**

Most practitioners feel there is very limited useful training available to them, partly due to a lack of knowledge about training and partly due to the sense that their role is particularly specialised. Many rely on informal mentoring and support from colleagues to reflect on and learn from their experiences.

Practitioners felt they would benefit from training in the following areas:

- **Project management** – either to underpin their existing skills or to gain formal recognition for their achievements
- **Financial management or administration** – particularly because of the limited support and funding for their roles

- **Fundraising and entrepreneurship** – because many have to generate their own funds for projects, or need to sell their work both internally and externally
- **People skills** – although most practitioners had excellent skills in this area, because of the challenging nature of their work most felt they needed extra support to formalise their knowledge
- **Formal knowledge** – while they might have expertise in a particular community, some practitioners lack formal knowledge of other excluded groups, as well as a grasp of local and national government policy which might affect funding, and community development theory.

### 1.3.2 The cultural context

#### **The experience of being a Community Engagement Worker in the arts:**

Practitioners have high levels of both satisfaction and frustration in their work. Pressures come from limited funding and from their organisation and colleagues. There is a varying level of involvement with other departments, with practitioners usually 'housed' within either Education or Marketing departments. Despite this, there are few examples of practical collaborations with these departments, and the lack of a broader, inter-departmental approach to community engagement creates a limited organisational impact. Where practitioners reported inputting into strategic planning, this was normally on an informal basis without regular participation in key meetings.

#### **Internal & external support needs:**

Organisational policies can either fail to support community engagement or actively impair it. A need for managers to strike a balance between being available to provide support, feedback and a strategic overview, and trusting workers and allowing them autonomy was reported.

Administrative burdens are problematic for community engagement workers as they spend so much time out of the office. Without sufficient systems community contacts can be lost when a particular worker moves on; this is exacerbated by the pace of change in the often short-term funded community and voluntary sector.

Practitioners need particular support from their organisation and networking opportunities, in order to disseminate learning, best practice and project success both internally and through contact with others involved in similar work.

More flexible and longevity in funding would allow momentum to develop and a greater understanding of the 'soft', qualitative outcomes achieved through community engagement work. A three-year time-frame was often quoted as the minimum for community engagement to make a recognisable impact.

Greater collaboration between organisations would help to meet the diverse needs of communities, and provide a broader range of opportunities and the development of more innovative and larger-scale work. Partnerships across the arts, voluntary and business sectors could also have greater impact. Community engagement practitioners would be ideal brokers for these relationships.

### 1.3.3 The practice

Community engagement workers have a hands-on, integrated approach and are personally involved in each stage of projects, from start to finish. This study identifies a five-stage process in practitioners' work:

- 1 Desk **research, liaising or consulting**.
- 2 **Networking** takes place through a range of formal, informal and cross-sector connections. Practitioners either trust networks to 'spread the word', ask particular partners to identify participants, or 'colonise' networks using ambassadors.
- 3 A personal approach is vital in **approaching** target participants. Going out to meet communities on their own terms and on their own territory is a key way to gain respect and trust.
- 4 Practitioners tailor their activities to **engage** communities, with a focus on creativity, participation, empowerment, accessibility and trust. A long term investment is also important, as are collaborative project development, workshops and creative activities.
- 5 Practitioners find it essential to **maintain** contact with communities, and identify ways for their organisations to stay relevant.

#### **Working with communities:**

Practitioners work with a wide range of clients, cutting across most types of target group, but usually with a strong local focus. Participants and partners are selected according to the requirements of funders, broader organisational strategies, programming or the engagement worker's own knowledge of interest and need.

#### **Evaluation and measuring success:**

Evaluation of engagement work ranges from informal review to commissioned external studies. Success is judged through attendance rates, the types of people taking part or the quality of the product or participants' experience, as well as external targets imposed by funders. Qualitative data is most widely used, as this measures soft outcomes; where quantitative techniques are used, there is very limited longitudinal comparison. However, an ongoing, iterative process of questioning and evaluating is central to the flexibility and responsiveness of successful projects.

#### **Barriers to participation:**

Organisations who regard community engagement as a secondary activity, can compromise both the quality and long-term sustainability of the work and affect the trust the organisation can earn in the community. A failure to reach out in appropriate ways intensifies the sense of communities' that cultural activities are 'not for the likes of us'.

Practitioners have to work to overcome barriers faced by project participants at every stage in the process, from a lack of awareness about what is on offer to placing little or no value in the arts or lacking the confidence and experience to comfortably engage with the arts.

### 1.4 Implications

### **The benefits of community engagement:**

Community engagement practice seems to offer considerable advantages to cultural organisations. In a healthy, thriving 21<sup>st</sup> century arts organisation, its practice can benefit internal stakeholders, potential arts attenders and participants and wider agendas including community cohesion and citizenship. It is widely accepted that face-to-face communication, active management of ambassadorial relationships and community involvement are essential to making any inroads into non-engaged communities. This is not just about meeting public funding requirement but finding a role and set of relationships that sustain a cultural organisation and give it local value. The question of whether cultural organisations can afford not to invest in high quality community engagement is becoming more important.

### **Investing in community engagement:**

Cultural organisations need to recognise that community engagement practice requires special skills and experience in those individuals charged to broker relationships. Organisations need to be able to not only host a community engagement worker but actually support them particularly when it comes to sharing their learning internally. Community engagement workers may be largely responsible for the positioning of an organisation in its local community, and as such can play an influential role.

### **Organisational requirements:**

The key factor for an organisation considering hosting a community engagement post is willingness – and ability – to change and make adjustments in response to a community relationship. Successful community engagement needs to be driven by a genuine interest and commitment to its processes and outcomes, as it is resource-intensive and takes place over extended periods of time.

The **basic organisational requirements** for effective community engagement are:

- Flexibility
- Clarity of purpose
- Commitment from management
- A long-term view
- A way of sharing learning and capturing knowledge to maintain relationships over time.
- Accountability and or capacity to manage expectations.

To develop a **highly ‘engagement-friendly’ culture**, organisations need:

- To develop collaborative working between community engagement, marketing and programming departments
- Underlying processes and practices for reaching target groups
- Resources to deliver, including budgets, people hours and skills.
- An open mind when it comes to the offer – for example, offering a flexible space in which people can do their own activity is often more valued than offering a free ticket or workshop.

For community engagement to be **ideally integrated** into an organisation's strategy, an organisation should aspire:

- for all colleagues to understand what engagement is about and pursue it in their own roles.
- to build a culture of strategic planning, evaluation and reflection, with a related audience development strategy joining up programming, marketing and community engagement .
- for engagement workers to input into organisational strategy, be supported administratively and with communication tools, and to have long-term generic budgets (not just project budgets) within their control.
- to have realistic expectations of what workers can achieve, and understand the issues well enough to offer positive feedback when appropriate.

### **The community development backdrop:**

'Community development' is a related but more formal discipline, widespread in health, regeneration and local government. The principles of community development are often applied by these practitioners in their work. The social regeneration agenda is an important reference point for community engagement workers in the cultural sector and cultural organisations can potentially play an important role here - building active and sustainable communities and removing barriers to participation. This study asks some questions about how far practice in the cultural sector is learning from community development elsewhere but this is not the main focus of this research. It is an important area for further exploration not just in terms of developing community engagement practice in the cultural sector but as a platform for exploring cross-sector partnerships.

### **Building a profession:**

A diversity of backgrounds and interests among entrants also means a diversity of training needs, so a successful learning programme must be built on flexibility. Broadly speaking, while practitioners may lack formal qualifications they have a high level of understanding, knowledge and skills in the areas of:

- arts and creativity
- arts organisations and their contexts
- communities
- self-management
- working with people
- programme concept and design
- project delivery

A successful professional development programme must seek to acknowledge existing skills, underpinning those which are particularly important, while offering additional knowledge where appropriate.

Training is not all that is required to support this highly specialised and demanding role; there is a long way to go before the practice is fully recognised and accepted across the arts sector. To promote effective community engagement and guard against a skills drain in this new and pioneering field, further networks, ongoing professional development opportunities, engagement training for colleagues and managers, more flexible funding, and advocacy to organisations is needed.

## 1.5 Conclusion

This research was carried out in 2005/6. Since then, arts sector interest in community engagement has grown, especially in larger cultural organisations. Interest from outside the arts sector into the potential of the arts to facilitate community engagement has also grown, with the result that there are now greater opportunities for collaboration and cross-sector partnerships.

In 2007, in response to this research, Audiences London ran a successful pilot learning programme called **Generate** specifically designed for Community Engagement workers in the arts. We also hosted a conference called: **Let's Get Engaged** on issues related to this practice. Since then Audiences London have been developing new plans to further learning in this area and the development of the Generate learning programme, and continues to bring practitioners together to continue to discuss and reflect on emerging Community Engagement practice. Resources include **a professional network** for Community Engagement workers in the arts, **an e-newsletter** with related news, **free local networking events** bringing together the cultural, community and voluntary sector, **training and opportunities** and a **database directory** of community engagement practitioners in London which is currently in development. Audiences London also offer a changing programme of training and events on subjects related to Community Engagement as well as bespoke consultancy, training and research.

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