

Culture Cumbria \ Christian Barnes

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A relevant purpose for Culture Cumbria ?

Submitted by [geoff cox](#) on Mon, 11/01/2010 - 23:31. Member ★★

"Sorry to appear negative here Christian but Culture Cumbria was formed at least 4 years ago. Presumably to get funding it put forward a convincing case with a definite purpose, aims and objectives.

Granted the speakers at the AGMs were interesting but I'd guess that the majority of those of us attending weren't practicing artists, though some were. So I assumed that cultural strategies were aimed at cultural administrators. Well the money given to meet the aims and objectives has now all gone. I'm not interested where it went, I have no doubt it was well spent. I just wondered what achievements we can look back on as a foundation to move forward.

Seeking a new relevance and sense of purpose is a good idea but only if the aims and achievements of the last four need it.

Regarding members of this forum suggesting what they would like it to be. I'd ask the question what has it been for the past 4 years?

As a new member of the committee - for only a few weeks - I understand that you had no input in past initiatives and want to move forward. I merely want to know what the past objectives were and how they were met. If they were primarily aimed at funded cultural providers or there was a strategy to actively involve individual artists."

Tension (Mind the Gap)

Culture Cumbria has been torn between blue sky thinking and the provision of services for money. The inability to resolve this tension has hampered it in communicating with its membership. It is in the nature of hubristic aspirations such as those apparently discussed at Grizedale that they absorb a vast amount of time in their mobilisation not to mention cash resources and indeed some suspicion amongst those not a party to discussion.

I recognised Euan's presentation during our meeting yesterday as to the background and context to Culture Cumbria as being both an accurate picture and unflinchingly honest as well as being succinct. He is right to claim partnership and advocacy successes in the creation of a cultural tourism role and the Myerscough research and right to point to the failure of the cultural investment strategy. I have no complaint about projects which are tried, developed and do not succeed. I think that engaging with this issue was worth the effort because something could have come of it but ultimately the thinking of those involved is driven solely by the need to mitigate risk and this is just not what the creative sector is all about.

As a result of Euan's presentation I felt that Geoff could have been answered well and I think there is a need to close this period with a report that can be disseminated to stakeholders.

What Geoff's comments point to for me is an omission in Culture Cumbria's portfolio of activities: specifically a failure to communicate about its activities and emerging purpose to its membership.

There has been no newsletter, no press releases, no commentary and no criticism of 'partners' whose judgement has been poor but whose shilling we have taken!

Although there have been achievements which could have been framed in a positive light, throughout its life Culture Cumbria has failed to bridge the gap between testing blue sky

thinking and the delivery of initiatives which members can recognise as being something around which campaigning activity and advocacy can coalesce.

In looking at the next few years we need to resolve this tension and concentrate on the building and development of specific narrow aims. We need to establish a clear narrative to members and those external to the sector and we need to demonstrate our purpose with some practical activity.

We should also plan to defray our costs with earned income.

My considered view is that the status of the creative sector needs to be significantly raised in order for it to function properly.

Culture Cumbria could approach this aspiration by

1. interrogating and reorganising its membership and
2. by developing an initiative intended to raise the status of the sector and validate achievements in the arts.

Resources

We have been at pains in our discussions to discuss cash resources, in effect, the funding for Nick and Euan's roles as our "secretariat". However, I believe that we have greater resources than this and we should attempt to describe them accurately.

Euan rightly points to the issue of stakeholder engagement and the interest and support of those like myself who have been motivated to seek election to the board. This has all been about making the sector's voice heard. I have been considering the relationship of the board members to the organisation. Around the table at yesterday's meeting were a number of people whose presence is funded by their employers and those who are not funded in this way. I feel that the value of this resource, the combined salary of everybody in the room for the time they are there and their commitment to work outside the board meetings on behalf of Culture Cumbria should be formally recorded and valued.¹

Membership

Another resource that I feel we could investigate and exploit relates to our membership. Euan said that there are two hundred members, fifty of whom are corporate. I believe we should appoint a small membership working group which I would like to put myself and Kate Brundrett forward for hopefully another couple of volunteers whose knowledge of the organisation goes back some way to look at membership issues. We should report as a matter of urgency our recommendations to the board and consider the development of a tiered hierarchy of membership categories.

Further down the line given that what is proposed would produce an income it might be appropriate to consider charitable purpose/status and covenanted income.

Patrons

Our discussion of the identity of a future co-opted chair revealed our need to pedal influence. In fact there are many influential Cumbrians who could do this on our behalf - if the right offer was made to them. I am thinking of such luminaries as Conrad Atkinson, Margaret Harrison, Melvyn Bragg, Chris Bonington, Mary Birkett, Kieth Tyson and perhaps those like Bryan Gray

¹ The cost of my presence includes Vista's loss of earnings, my expenses in travelling to whatever venue and the occasional cost of child care. This is something which I have subscribed to Culture Cumbria for a term of three years. Any cost which I incur but do not recover has a precise value that can be audited. If nothing else I would like to see it used as match in kind in the organisation's application for funding.

who have a significant interest in the county and given that patronage will be less onerous than chairing perhaps David could continue his association with Culture Cumbria? Clearly Patrons should be drawn from all sections of the creative sector and I am sure members would wish to suggest appropriate candidates.

This idea came up during a conversation with Sandra Wood around the identity of the Chair which was an action point in our last meeting. The tension that exists between the blue sky long term aspiration and short term delivery led us to discuss the idea of a working Chair elected from the board membership (or co-opted) and focussed on the short term with time and capacity but perhaps not at the level of influence which was an aspiration in our discussion of the 18th December.

I would like to come back to the role of patrons (which I think could usefully include corporate patrons) under my comments under awards.

Stakeholders

There has been some discussion in the forum of the Cumbria Network around the issues of introducing a charge for membership as a service. I felt that I would have been willing to pay but that the value of the network's offer to me would have been reduced by the exodus of non-payers. Therefore I like the idea of a professional membership group which pays a fee to subscribe to and support Culture Cumbria. This group would need to receive benefits of sufficient value to justify the cost for an annual subscription. N.B. As I invariably prune my subscriptions at the calendar year end I would suggest an automatic renewal in July and the use of a direct debit.

I think this group would benefit from the circulation of a newsletter, the use of a website and the opportunity to network with other stakeholders and patrons. I feel that this category of membership would be most suitable for established organisations and individuals who all meet some pre-determined criteria in order to qualify. I would place myself in this group.

Members

I think there is also a key role for ordinary members (free) perhaps without the same rights or privileges as stakeholders. Ordinary members could include young people, students in fulltime education, amateur practitioners and recent graduates who might benefit from sector support at the most difficult time in their careers managing the transition from education to creative sector employment.

I recall a conversation I once had with the Audrey Barker. Audrey (nee Melville) first exhibited as a brush painter in the 1950s with the New English Art Club and other peer controlled exhibition committees. As I now own her library I have been delighted to find the evidence to prove it! At that time it was possible for a brush painter to make appointments for their work to be shown to art dealers and others and to be offered criticism. I remember her comparing this experience with her post Lisson Gallery experience where the role of curators and administrators and the Arts Council became the means through which her creative output was mediated and she felt finally extinguished in the graveyard of ambition that she described as Cumbria. The value of the systems she described was in the relationships and exchange that existed between senior and junior members of a profession. The membership structure that I have outlined would create a vertical conduit for the exchange of understanding between those who have reached the top of the sector and those who are entering it.

Twenty years ago it was a badge of honour to receive an award from the Arts Council. Although the money was so insignificant as to be worse than useless, the access and the expertise that came with it were of huge value. As the Arts Council has moved towards an alignment with government sponsored social agendas (and the funds involved have increased) the expertise of its officers has changed. This transit from a sector position to a lottery distributor focussed primarily on SLAs with RFO's has not been beneficial to the sector

although it has had benefits and it would be inappropriate to describe it as a wrong turn. The heart of what I am saying is that a key component of invigorating the creative sector is to develop a mechanism that allows for locally owned processes of public validation. The development of the membership as an asset to Culture Cumbria could respond to this agenda.

The Cumbria Network

The Cumbria Network was set up as a social network dedicated to artists and creative businesses. Perhaps because of its membership there is a perception of it as being exclusive to the visual arts, although this is not a product of its constitution, the network has been through several phases of relevance and value and is currently in something of a crisis. The explosion of online social networking has seen a migration of active members to other online social networking platforms and the network needs to identify a way forward. I think that the network could become in some way integrated with or provide services to Culture Cumbria to include such things as a closed member's area. It could also take over the administration of the membership base and in the process interrogate the membership for more data. If we were to pursue this idea I think there would be some mileage in looking to the network to take on the role of membership secretary at Culture Cumbria and manage this resource on our behalf and by management I don't mean maintain. I mean *develop*.

Awards

As my primary aspiration for Culture Cumbria is that it seeks to raise the status of the creative sector in Cumbria I would like to propose the creation of an annual awards giving. This is something which has been proposed and discussed by others including Kate Brundrett. It could start low key and be matched to available resources at one end of the spectrum being little more than a letter and a press release but which has the potential to grow into a promotional hosted event.

I see a role for the patrons of Culture Cumbria in relation to this initiative in providing the value of prizes (not necessarily cash), for example, the Chris Bonnington Award for Adventure Writing, the Cumbria Tourist Board Award for the best Cultural Attraction, the Melvyn Bragg Award for the best artist in Wigton etc. etc. (Obviously this should be a 'Meal with Melvin!') I think that this initiative should form part of our approach to and proposition of potential patrons. (NB the Brian Gray Award for best Capital Project!).

This process of prize giving allows for the exchange of status and professional engagement and validation throughout the membership from top to bottom. It also helps maintain a line of communication for senior professionals with young and aspiring creatives. It is a two way street. Awards are also a sponsorship vehicle which is useful to corporations as well as individuals.

In Kendal ex-director of the Brewery Arts Centre, Anne Pierson, gives an award for young people's writing. It has become a valued annual event and it offers an inexperienced author access to expertise and validation that they can usefully claim on their CV.

I talked earlier of the need to demonstrate our purpose by doing things. I think that two narrow aims which we could usefully pursue are the development of membership and the renewal of the validation process that has been neglected by the profession. I also think that Culture Cumbria should be unafraid to use the awards to deliver booby prizes just as the K Foundation awarded Rachael Whitread a prize for the worst art on the same day that she won the Turner Prize.

I think that 'antagonism' often produces a better quality of debate and that criticism often leads to the proving of arguments so I think that in order to maintain its independent cultural voice Culture Cumbria should at the same time it offers validation criticise those initiatives

which have failed to deliver for the arts. From a media perspective issues that are dealt with in this way are 'sticky' and generate more coverage.

Communication

I started this paper with a note from Geoff Cox which points to the need for Culture Cumbria to develop its ability to communicate both internally and externally. What I have set out is a description of membership would see the creative sector in Cumbria served by a body like a sort of Chamber of Trade linked to area. It is essential that any such organisation has the independence to offer hostile criticism of initiatives which are not working. For this reason I think we need to be careful about whose shilling we accept and the terms on which we do it. Culture Cumbria has allowed itself to be funding led for too long and this has compromised its authority in the eyes of the sector.

At the end of two years we could point to a development of the membership as a cultural asset to the county and the establishment of an awards ceremony. If nothing else we would have given the sector a voice, demonstrated our value by doing something and have created an advocacy platform controlled by the creative sector.

Wednesday, 20 January 2010
Christian Barnes.