

The Brief –

A Research Proposal to examine options for future development

Background

Culture Cumbria and the Cultural Policy Unit (CPU) of Cumbria County Council are reviewing their current organisational roles and functions, as well as examining the wider strategic need and opportunities for better supporting the cultural sector.

To help inform this process this piece of research has been commissioned by Bruce Bennison, Head of Cultural Policy, Cumbria County Council with the support and agreement of Culture Cumbria.

The aims of this initial research are to identify a range of comparable models that would support the sector by;

- Establishing an influential, unified voice able to transform the sector by establishing appropriate and agreed strategies
- Develop quality, profile, sustainability, growth and recognition of our county's assets
- Identifying, in outline, different models of alternative delivery for some aspects of current cultural activity

Methodology

The board of Culture Cumbria identified broadly comparable organisations;

Hi Arts (HA)
Newcastle Gateshead Initiative (NGI)
Creative Services Cornwall (CSC)
LARC
Oxford Inspires (OI)

Through telephone research I ascertained their purpose, function(s) and how/why the organisation was established. The research questions were agreed with the board and CPU prior to the research commencing. The same questions were asked of all organisations researched in order to compare and contrast in a consistent manner.

The results of the research will be presented both in written format and verbally to the Board of Culture Cumbria and the CPU. This will set out the findings of the review, the relative strengths and weaknesses of the organisations consulted and any recommendations for specific models that emerge.

The process will also identify a set of criteria and conditions which need to be in place for any such models to be developed in Cumbria and an assessment of the nature of any changes necessary to current conditions in Cumbria to enable that to happen.

Synopsis of interviews

Of the five models researched, one is run by the County Council (CSC), one is a consortium (LARC) and three are independent organisations (NGI), 2 of which are charities (HA, OI)

Aims

All the models have broadly similar aims.

All are involved in commissioning research, marketing, advocacy, tourism and economic regeneration.

All of the models programme and deliver festivals and events.

Uniquely NGI have a strong focus on conference & business tourism.

All models provide sector support functions (funding, advice, tools), with NGI focussing least directly on this aspect.

All are opportunistic.

Catalysts for creation

LARC is the only model established and managed by the sector itself.

CSC is an interesting model as it was established by the sector and then adopted by the local authorities.

HA emerged from work undertaken by the local regeneration company Hi Arts Enterprise.

OI was established by the local authorities, the Arts Council and Oxford University.

NGI emerged from regeneration work taking place and was established by the local authorities.

Relationship with the local authority

OI are contracted by the County Council and have an SLA with the City Council. They meet arts officers from the districts through an Oxfordshire arts partnership. The Arts Council have cut funding directly to the district arts officers, instead they fund the collective of arts officers to do strategic, collaborative work. Since then the relationship between OI and the districts has been more effective.

The city councils formed NGI and are on the board. They are key stakeholders within the organisation.

LARC have had historic difficulties relating to the L.A

CSC is a completely in house team. They say that the model is not working well.

HA are independent of the L.A. They apply for funding for specific projects and have successfully tendered for contracts. They maintain a positive but arms length relationship.

Relationship with the sector

OI have an informal but close relationship with the sector. They run networking events for the sector.

NGI are establishing a cultural advisory panel in the wake of Culture 10 being dismantled. The panel will establish a 365 programme, co-ordinating and marketing programming across Newcastle

Gateshead. They have run focus groups with the sector to establish a new 10 year cultural vision. They link with GANAF which is a network of the 'big 8' organisations.

LARC have organised some wider strategic meetings but most of their work is focussed on their select network. They are aware they will need to consider whether it is too exclusive.

CSC has a steering group which includes representatives from the sector. The steering group can lobby them but have no authority.

HA work very closely with the sector.

Profile

There is consensus that they keep their profile low because generally they are marketing events and cultural organisations rather than their own organisation. A concern is that developing a public profile raises unhelpful expectations. None of the organisations encourage 'drop in'. Instead they try to retain a high profile in the areas that they are developing and working within.

The challenge is to retain a high profile amongst stakeholders, politicians and the business community especially with a view to impending cuts.

Successes and strengths

Whether the model is working depends a lot on the personalities of key stakeholders involved. Several referenced their success depending on mutual trust and a mature approach to the work.

LARC commented on their model of external leadership, a more directive model of leadership. They view it as a more sustainable model because political authority comes and goes and so do arts development officers. They also commented on the benefits of a consortia approach to development agencies. They mentioned the health sector as an opportune market as the sector is willing to look laterally and creatively at approaches to preventative health strategies. Willingness to collaborate, strong group of leaders, they are open and willing to collaborate and think creatively.

LARC and HA referenced their approach to sustainability and capacity building as key strengths. Both work hard to ensure that they are establishing new initiatives/programmes that can then be sustained without being dependant on them. HA aim to pilot activity which is then taken on by a cultural organisation or stimulates the development of a new organisation. They aim to embed learning within the organisations they work with.

CSC refers to benefits of when they were inside the authority with one foot in the sector. They could draw down resources that the L.A couldn't. It was a really useful model. There are current benefits to being entirely in the County i.e. much greater visibility. Whilst they have greater ability to make stuff happen they have less autonomy and less say.

HA report on a great strength being the triangular relationship maintained between HIE, SAC and Hi Arts. They often act as the eyes and ears on ground for the SAC, feeding direct intelligence back to art form officers.

HIE's strong social remit has meant that Hi Arts has been able to get involved in all sorts of cultural and economic development that they might not otherwise have been i.e. sectors, projects and organisations that are working for profit or with commercial success. They look at excellence in a variety of ways; they are not just judging artistic excellence, but also business excellence.

HA talk about the high economic growth potential of community practitioners - they have sustainable approaches to their work, are supporting the sustainability of communities as a whole and the number of practitioners tends to be increasing. When massive job losses occur when huge mono industries go under, the earnings of those individuals tend to not be very high and job prospects low. Conversely community practitioners have usually chosen their job, and have high economic growth potential. They don't look at trying to grow companies, but how to grow sectors for economic and social benefit.

Called Archipelago, they outsource all aspects of the programme when it becomes stable and sustainable, by setting up development bodies that take over the operation. They ensure that the operation doesn't grow in size, maintaining approximately 12 staff. They will usually retain links with the organisation but the organisations are self defining, autonomous, independent organisations. Some are still based in the same office but are self determining.

HA believe that the credit crunch will bring increased tourism and international work.

HA have chosen not to establish membership. The degree of objectivity and inclusiveness that comes when you don't have membership is very valuable. It means you don't have to compromise your aims and objectives. If you are always trying to reflect the competing needs of members it can confuse purpose and mission (he gave an example of a membership organisation that had grown out of Hi Arts which had since disbanded due to lack of clarity of purpose and mission).

Weaknesses and challenges

The economic situation has dissuaded OI from approaching trust funds.

There is general concern about local government budgets.

All organisations are concerned about capacity.

Whilst some organisations are concerned about reliance on a small number of funders, others struggle with the challenges of managing multiple expectations and demands of multiple funders.

All are balancing the range of things they are asked/expected to do with their ability to deliver.

LARC are particularly concerned about capacity as their ability to deliver is reliant on the time and good will of those involved. The model is self limiting, as Thrive is time limited and the partner organisations are operating beyond capacity. Decision making is time consuming when operating as a collaborative. The recession means that Chief Execs have less time for collaboration and are more focussed on their own organisations.

The CSC model is not particularly working. Within Leisure and Culture, Cultural Services are structurally weak compared to leisure, libraries etc. They employ only a handful of staff compared to hundreds. Within their team they suffer discomfort as they are viewed as a service but don't operate as one. What they deliver is very patchy. Previous districts didn't have comparable resources. When you merge you haven't got like with like. They are in transition still. New authority only happened in April. First two years will probably be a case of rationalising. What they are trying to do is a mixed bag of stuff. No autonomy.

HA are concerned about any political change as the SAC changes to Creative Scotland. Despite reassurances that a new Scottish government would continue to support the social as well as economic developments they still have concerns about this.

The issue around identity, profile and who needs to know about you, the lack of clarity, although it also gives you flexibility

1-5 year plans

OI want to make it an easier and better county for arts organisations to exist in.

CSC is bidding for European region of culture. To make culture one of the top four priorities for the local authority - culture is a strong driver for economic growth, they want it be positioned as such; 'Our sector is worth 500-600 million to Cornwall's economy, it would be great to get it up to 1 billion'.

HA want to sustain and nurture what's been achieved. To continue working beyond Hi Arts geographical boundaries to address how Scotland should function as a whole. To ensure that others understand the value of what's been achieved. To move now in the new context of trying to argue at a national level for rural needs in general. To argue for maintenance of the existing Highlands and Islands infrastructure and campaign for other rural areas to also benefit from a similar infrastructure. To proclaim what's been achieved, to compare it to any other rural part of Scotland and look how sparse they are by comparison. Hi Arts want their work to be truly representative of the whole nation and argue the need to put other structures in place to continue the growth they have started. Hi Arts consider that they can provide direct, objective and 'tough' advice at a national level that is perhaps a funding body is less able to do so.

Overall Summary

The loose knit consortium model (LARC) is an interesting and successful model; however weaknesses are reliance on the capacity of the organisations involved and the time involved making consensual decisions.

Oxford Inspires is a successful model. It is currently working on a smaller scale than HA and NGI with a more narrow, arts based focus.

HA priorities, having spent years developing the infrastructure are to now advocate for their work at a national level.

Interestingly NGI (arguably the highest profile, most successful model) have had a 'top down' approach to culture but are now disbanding Culture 10 and instead starting to work with the existing cultural offer.

Three of the models prize highly their independence from, but positive relationship with the local authority. The model based within the County claim that the model is currently not working mainly due to lack of autonomy and structural difficulties.

In all cases there is a compelling catalyst for the model. The demand for the functions of the model has come from (variously) the sector, the local authority, regeneration agencies and the arts council.

All of the models have prioritised the nurturing of new festivals and events with the aim of boosting tourism and the economy. All models are also prioritising investment into organisations/programmes identified with growth potential.

There is consensus that they keep their public profile low. Instead they try to retain a high profile in the areas that they are developing and working within and amongst stakeholders, politicians and the business community especially with a view to impending cuts i.e. profile and branding of events tends to be very high, but the branding of the organisation itself is low and by association with the event. NGI manages to adopt a cohesive approach to the branding of culture and Newcastle Gateshead.

Evidencing the value of culture is a high priority for all organisations. As one interviewee said 'Culture is a strong driver for economic growth, I want it to be positioned as such.'

The organisations that demonstrate working within the broadest definition of culture are also the largest organisations (highest no of employees and turnover). Their work is arguably higher profile, more dynamic and the organisations are more powerful advocates for culture than the smaller models. HA and NGI both claim that cross sector working delivers significant benefits.

All models demonstrate an element of delivery of cultural programme. As they develop the cultural infrastructure the majority aim to decrease delivery. As one interviewee said 'We spent 10 years growing an infrastructure, so that we don't have to be doing everything for everyone. We don't aim to deliver. Our job is to make sure that the networks and support structures are doing the job and that they have the resources necessary'. Many of the models aim to initiate programmes of activity that can be sustained by existing or new cultural organisations and through close collaboration with the sector aim to 'embed learning' through cultural developments i.e. Hi Arts example, Archipelago, where they

outsource all aspects of the programme when it becomes stable and sustainable, by setting up development bodies that take over the operation.

Developing the infrastructure from the 'ground up' and advocating for culture locally, nationally and internationally do not appear to be mutually exclusive, nor are they approached in any particular order. With regards to Culture, NGI have first taken a 'top down' approach programming high profile, large scale events, they are now looking at how they can develop closer links with established organisations and events. CSC spent ten years developing the infrastructure before the organisation morphed into a more ambassadorial, advocacy vehicle. Hi Arts have adopted a mutual approach to grassroots cultural development and high profile advocacy.

All of the organisations talked about balancing the difficulty of managing multiple and competing expectations and demands from the sector, funders and in some cases members with the capacity to deliver. All have different strategies for identifying development opportunities, need, and demand or simply seizing opportunities as opposed to trying to be 'everything to everyone'.

There is general concern about local and central government budgets and organisational capacity.

The best bits of all the models

This research has identified a range of functions that the five researched cultural support agencies undertake. Taking the most effective functions of all of the cultural support models and adopting John Myerscough's recommendations the list of potential functions appears below. Obviously this is not a 'shopping list' and there are some functions that would or would not be appropriate.

Culture

Launch a cultural vision

Bidding for accolades such as Capital of Culture

Boost the economic development and visitor economy by supporting existing and programming new high profile festivals and events in iconic locations

Raise aspirations, stimulate creativity and encourage self-belief (in the people of Cumbria) and the wider region

Inspire business confidence, create jobs and develop skills through culture

Develop sector specific and locality based networks and partnerships, developing the capability and sustainability of individual organisations through collaboration

Develop national and international institutional links with 'like minded' organisations

Attract visitors and encourage them to stay longer

Deliver cultural leadership programmes for emerging leaders

Provide specialist support services (audience development, VAT, evaluation etc)

Commission research (socio economic impact of work, links between cultural organisations and education sector etc)

Conferences and seminars (topical issues, influential and controversial keynote speakers)

Collective bidding for local authority, arts council and central government initiatives

Work with the sector to co-programme collaborative, strategic activities

Increase the critical mass of creative practitioners and critical mass of opportunities for people to participate in culture

Provide training, guidance and showcasing for emerging creative practitioners

Volunteer development

Invest in specialisms, niches and market strengths

Audience development, enhancing the marketing capacities for organisations and promoters

Training opportunities designed to raise the aspirations and ambitions of creative practitioners

Training to develop business, commercial and entrepreneurial skills within the creative sector

Seed funding – enable support for significant opportunities as they arise

Emergent organisations – funding for key projects which will enable organisations and individuals to exploit a major development opportunity

Investment into long term strategic development opportunities (as opposed to repeated pilots)

Importing and exporting high profile, high quality cultural events

Apprentice and skills development programmes for young people

Collaborative marketing, programming and branding of events across Cumbria

Co-ordinate arts development functions for Cumbria

Support for capital development projects

Drive creative industries development strategies

Support and networks for individual cultural practitioners

High profile, iconic public art and design initiatives

Destination Management and Tourism

Increase the number of hotel beds and occupancy

Increase international visitor numbers to Cumbria

Deliver training and business support to tourism businesses

Maintain and expand the tourism economy

Establish a strong Area Tourism Partnership delivering regional roles in business tourism, cruise and international marketing and PR.

Advocacy, marketing and PR

Host study visits or deliver presentations to visiting countries or cities to help position Cumbria's reputation nationally and internationally.

Attract national and international journalists to write about Cumbria.

Mount a major pride campaign enlisting the support of the whole population in promoting the strengths of Cumbria

- Harness the pride and passion of our people.
- Position Cumbria as one of the UK's best places to live and work.
- Help to promote everything that is world-class about Cumbria
- Celebrate and promote the success of our members' businesses.
- Make Cumbria a venue for world class events.
- Develop and learn from partnership with other cities nationally and internationally.

Conferencing and Business Tourism

Support and champion the delivery of improved conference centre facilities

Drive increased association conference business to Cumbria based on priorities of energy, science and culture.

Membership and Partners

Grow membership from both business and tourism sectors and engage them in actively promoting Cumbria as a place to live, work, learn and visit.

Help attract new business to Cumbria on strategic sites.

Deliver a new programme helping to promote Cumbria as a world-class learning county, working with Cumbria University and our further education establishments.

Increase the commercial income over the next five years reducing our reliance on funding

Harness private sector engagement and support for the promotion of Cumbria

Identify credible champions with influence i.e. the media, and politicians, senior people in the local authority, key industry figures.

Challenges

With reference to the list of cultural support functions above, the challenge is whether there is demand or support for any of these functions? As one interviewee asked 'What is the compelling, rallying call? There needs to be a hunger for it, otherwise what is the point?' Which stakeholders are 'biting our hands off' for which of the above functions?

Another interviewee suggested that 'Culture Cumbria need to be clear about what their purpose is. Then they need to get 'buy in'. They have limited profile and support. Unless the leaders of councils have a strong sense that this is exciting and worthwhile and they access big money from NWDA it's going to be a struggle. It needs a really big highly persuasive personality with credibility and an all encompassing vision to drive this. They would need to engage powerful, strong leadership at the top of the council, the media, business and people with 'clout'. Cumbria has got enough good things to make this happen. It's worth being aware that nobody is going to please anybody all of the time, not everyone will think it is fair, but it's about raising the game'.

A third interviewee said 'If we have to work to get consensus nothing will happen. We don't have a cultural tsar, so the challenge is how do we make this happen?'

If Culture Cumbria is to be the body that drives forwards this initiative it may need to rethink some perceived structural weaknesses:

- As a board we seek consensus, the danger is that this is time consuming and may dilute any radical, progressive plans.
- The individual and collective roles and responsibilities of chair, paid secretariat and board members are unclear
- Representation is unclear, are board members representing their organisations/sector/geographical area?
- Lack of clarity of purpose weakens credibility
- There is work to be done developing the cultural infrastructure through the strengthening of networks, until this is achieved there is a danger that Culture Cumbria exists in a vacuum

Additional challenges that have emerged through the research include;

- Where does leadership of the cultural sector come from in Cumbria?
- Who has the clout, persuasiveness, experience and credibility to drive this forward?
- Can any initiatives be effectively managed at a county wide level?
- What is the most efficient, sustainable delivery mechanism?
- What definition of culture should we be working to and demonstrating in the range of work, functions and partners?

Recommendations

As a group, we have now reflected on the John Myerscough report and the findings of this research. We now need to identify;

- 1) Who will lead the process of examining options for future development
- 2) What resources are available to implement any development strategies and whether we are planning to work within existing resources or make the case for further investment
- 3) What functions are demanded by the sector, the local authority, the regeneration agencies, the arts council and funders
- 4) What options are available for delivering development functions