

Arts Council England

Diversity – the journey

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'Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?'

'That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,' said the Cat.

'I don't much care where... ' said Alice.

'Then it doesn't matter which way you go,' said the Cat.

'...so long as I get somewhere,' Alice added as an explanation.

'Oh, you're sure to do that,' said the Cat, 'if you only walk long enough.'¹

As Arts Council England's Director of Diversity, I like to imagine that Alice and the Cheshire cat are having the same conversation but the subject they are discussing is diversity. Looked at that way, the exchange takes on an entirely different slant and becomes something both meaningful and helpful.

Like many other public sector organisations, Arts Council England wrestles with fundamental questions about inclusion and equality. Some answers could be found, no doubt, but at times we all struggle even to understand or even define the question. For example, what does it mean to the grandsons and granddaughters of the pioneering Windrush generation to be posed the question 'Are you British?' Is it a legal question about nationality or is it a question about social inclusion? Is the answer mutually exclusive? Or are the answers mutually exclusive? If the question posed is one of identity, then why do we seem to ask, even demand, that all Britons should have the same value systems and beliefs – that the cohesion of such a commonwealth is by collective necessity, a cultural closed shop. What happened to multiculturalism? Is it possible to be, for example, both British and Jewish at the same time without having to compromise either to the state or to dilute fundamental faith beliefs in order to fit in?

The Lewis Carroll dialectic raises important issues for the Arts Council; the most critical being where do we want to go on our own diversity journey? What is the journey's destination? Like Alice, can anyone show us the way? Where have we been, what did we see and experience, who did we meet and perhaps, most importantly what did we learn on this journey and how does it inform the planning of the route? Do we really care about this journey and what is the relevance, if any, of the itinerary and even quality of the journey? I suggest that all these are important considerations and are about commitment to making diversity work. If this diversity journey were to be taken by taxi for

example, it would be similar to the different experiences between hiring a taxi driven by a cabbie who has done ‘the knowledge’ and a fly-by-night unlicensed mini-cab. They both get you to your destination but the comfort, cost, route and time it takes to complete the journey may well differ significantly.

The destination

Our approach at the Arts Council is actually quite simple. For the arts to play a vital role in society they need to be relevant to the many, not just the few. This means that the importance of the Arts Council’s diversity agenda to the arts goes beyond what is sometimes described as the ‘legal’ or ‘business’ case. Our services must meet the needs of the whole community and those who provide the services must be aware of how their work contributes to removing institutional barriers, attitudinal as well as physical, which prevent communities from enjoying and participating in the arts. We aim to create an inclusive culture within our own organisation, where issues of racism, stereotyping and discrimination can be discussed openly, and where there is a shared commitment at all levels to challenging and preventing all forms of discrimination.

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We acknowledge that UK society consists of a wide variety of groups and communities, and that these differ in race, ethnicity, disability, gender, sexual orientation, class, age and religion. We believe that each group must have equal opportunity for artistic expression and each form of artistic expression should be valued equally. The Arts Council sees cultural difference as a value in itself and we are committed to playing an active role in promoting cultural understanding and tolerance. As an organisation and development agency, the Arts Council has a duty to show leadership in promoting equality and diversity in the arts. The route is difficult but we know what we mean by diversity and equality in the arts and, unlike Alice, this does give us a destination. Furthermore globalisation is proceeding at an accelerating rate. All organisations committed to promoting excellence on international, national and regional stages need to take a global view and be comfortable with diversity if the UK is

to remain at the forefront of human endeavour. Arts Council England recognises that the arts have a vital role to play in national and international cultural debates.

Some global trends present major new challenges to public institutions. For example, the rise of religion globally, as well as new migrations, feed new patterns of discrimination. More sophisticated forms of prejudice to do with language, place of origin and faith are rapidly replacing crude forms of racism as the major driver of unwarranted discrimination. The word ‘Muslim’ has become a dirty word, and has become a stereotype image. Muslims in this country are living a life of fear and intimidation. There are stories in the press of Muslim women being spat at in the streets of London or being verbally abused, called ‘killer’ and ‘terrorist’. The numbers of racist attacks in the streets are increasing and, for the first time, we are also seeing less tolerance between Britain’s ethnically diverse communities. Racism against Muslims, especially of Asian origin, is so widespread that we had to invent a new word for it – Islamophobia.

The Arts Council’s diversity agenda is concerned with all potential social barriers to access and participation, not only with race and ethnicity. Our diversity agenda should not remain fixed but will need to evolve over time in response to social changes and emerging patterns of discrimination.

The Arts Council’s approach to diversity has proceeded in parallel with the development of the wider human rights agenda that proposes to bring together existing equality strands under the umbrella of a single Commission for Equality and Human Rights. The diversity and wider human rights agenda offers ways of managing the increasing demands being placed on the Arts Council by citizens, groups and communities in a transparent and equitable way, and will underpin the development of a modern and progressive Arts Council England able to respond to the society we live in.

The journey to date

In his 2002 speech ‘Beyond Boundaries,’ Peter Hewitt, Arts Council England’s Chief Executive, set out the relevance of cultural differences to the work of the Arts Council. ‘We need to see art as trading between different cultures, disciplines and ways of viewing the world... the Arts Council’s job is to help create the platform for a multiplicity of artistic expression in this country, to reflect the multiplicity of cultural experiences in society and the richness of the environment in which we live.’²

The Arts Council's manifesto as set out in *Ambitions for the Arts 2003–06*, included its vision to promote the arts at the heart of national life. The Arts Council endorsed the 'belief that the arts have the power to transform lives, communities and opportunities for people throughout the country.' As part of the manifesto, the Arts Council placed 'cultural diversity' at the heart of our work offering the following as a definition at that time (2003): 'The term 'cultural diversity' can be interpreted in many different ways. We will take the broadest interpretation – as meaning the full range and diversity of the culture of this country – but with a particular focus on race and ethnic background.'

In transit

'Cultural diversity' had become, over the years, synonymous with race and ethnicity. Addressing issues of institutional racism was the correct thing to do in the post-McPherson years.³ We now need to take a different direction which recognises that discrimination – even of a racial nature – is usually the result of many factors, usually complex society failures, and that together they combine to create inequality. The child of a Black Cabinet Minister and that of a Black manual worker may both suffer forms of race discrimination – after all racism doesn't recognise many class distinctions – but their life opportunities are likely to be very different.

How we interpret our diversity approach and agenda now is a significant departure from our journey's route, but not from our destination. The Arts Council is fully aware of the responsibility the arts have within society as one of the most influential vehicles for forming and changing attitudes. For example, perhaps with the exception of Nelson Mandela, there isn't a politician anywhere else in the world that can have a stronger message about peace than John Lennon's *Imagine*. There are many millions of people who can sing that song. How many can quote a rousing Mandela speech?

Progress

Our achievements around a number of strategic interventions are set out below. I see these achievements as significant, but not sector changing – yet.

Fifty-eight per cent of all our funding (grant in aid and lottery) goes to a portfolio of 1,136 organisations which form the backbone of arts provision across the country. Of these (Regularly Funded Organisations) 13.2% are Black and minority ethnic-led or arts organisations whose work is Black and minority

ethnic-focused. This exceeded the target of 10%. (A Black and minority ethnic-led organisation is one whose governance and senior management tiers contain at least 51% Black and minority ethnic – members).

Through our Grants for the Arts Capital Programme there are 23 projects underway with a diversity focus with an allocation of £30 million. To date this has been one of the most significant

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commitments to diversity by the Arts Council.

Twenty-one per cent of all our funding goes to Open Application Funding Programmes (Grants for the Arts). Our five new simplified Grants for the Arts programmes replaced more than 140 old funding schemes across 11 independent organisations, opening up our awards to more new applicants than ever before. Our decibel funding ambassadors proactively promoted our grant programmes to Black and minority ethnic artists and groups resulting in many new Black and minority ethnic applicants to our programmes. Between 2003–04 and 2004–05 the number of applications from Black and minority ethnic individuals went up from 684 to 864 and awards from £1.9m plus to over £2.4m. Applications from Black and minority ethnic-led organisations went up from 467 to 665, and awards from £3.8m plus to over £4.7m. Fifty nine per cent of applications and 53% of awarded grants related to individuals and organisations that had not received Arts Council funding before.

Complementing reform of our grants programmes, the decibel programme ran from May 2003 to March 2004 as a celebration of diversity in the arts. Decibel has had an impact across a number of art forms. Its most significant and visible successes include the performing arts showcases in Manchester, a four-day event presenting the work of Asian, African and Caribbean performing artists in 2003 and 2005. Over 400 delegates from 18 countries attended. Seventy-eight pieces of work have been staged. In the visual arts, decibel has led interventions centred on the needs of Black and minority ethnic artists and curators,

providing debating forums, financial support based on recognition, two curatorial traineeships and two fellowships, as well as six two-year bursaries to artists for practice-based research. A number of those artists have since found permanent posts or have had exhibitions. A Free State was a two-day event at the British Museum concluding decibel's visual arts programme. In music, Freeness was a national project led by Chris Ofili. The programme toured England for three months, inviting musicians to bring their unreleased songs and tracks to be played to an audience with open minds and ears. Over 3,000 tracks were submitted. Tracks were selected for a CD and given away free in the Observer Music Monthly and independent record shops. In literature, decibel supported the establishment of DipNet (the diversity in publishing network). It has sponsored a Nibbie, or British Book Award, for the Black or Asian Writer of the Year. The decibel Penguin prize was established as a short story competition. The winners will be published in an anthology by Penguin.

Other initiatives include the Black Regional Initiative in Theatre (BRIT), a national initiative to help produce more Black and minority ethnic-led work in the theatre. This, together with the Eclipse programme, has led a programme of major change in the theatre sector and further work has resulted in the Sustained Theatre proposal for supporting Black theatre.

The New Audiences Programme (1998–2003) invested £20 million across the country in a range of regionally-led action research models and which generated 4,027,085 attendances to live arts events and was particularly successful in reaching 'new' audiences to the arts; with over a quarter of attendances (1,341,416) by young people, over half a million people (544,753) to Black and minority ethnic-led events and activities, 95,254 people recorded for projects addressing disability, and 93,721 people engaged in projects relating to the audience focus of social inclusion.

As part of the New Audiences Programme, the Roots pilot in the East Midlands was developed into a collaboration with all the BBC English regions and aimed to increase the volume, range and quality of African, Asian, Caribbean and Chinese cultural coverage on mainstream BBC radio, online and television. Eleven Roots Coordinators were jointly appointed with the BBC and together contacted some 910 artists and 385 community organisations and individuals resulting in 38,900 attendees to live events and activities supported by Roots.

The 'Arts and Islam' seminars and workshops have been presented to Arts Council staff and funded organisations throughout the country. They have provided an organisation-wide interest in developing our understanding of issues relating to faith groups and a genuine willingness by staff to engage with the challenges of reaching out to these artists and addressing barriers to attendance at arts events by faith communities. Our meeting with faith leaders, artists and the Commission for Racial Equality has initiated discussion and an Arts and Faith website now exists with useful information about the major world faiths and their interaction with the arts, providing a platform for further debate.

Our Race Equality Scheme (RES) was externally launched in 2005 partly as a response to national legislative requirements but, equally importantly, attempting to put into effect the desire of a newly unified Arts Council to place race equality and diversity at the centre of its work and achieve more visible and tangible results. The Arts Council has in place a three-year Race Equality Scheme and Action Plan, 2004–07. The action plan is being delivered by all our offices and focuses around three key themes: our clients and potential clients; our resources; our organisation. Of the 36 projects that make up the Action Plan, only one remains to be implemented completely.

The journey ahead

'There are real inequalities in the level and nature of engagement across different parts of society. The [Taking Part survey] data indicates that in general you are more likely to engage with the arts if you are white, well-educated, from a higher socio-economic group, without a limiting disability and live in southern or mid-England. However, there is huge variation across art forms and as these socio-demographic variables are all interrelated, we need to undertake more detailed analysis to understand which factors have most influence on levels of engagement with different art forms. Nevertheless, our initial descriptive statistics suggest that the greatest inequity is along socio-economic lines – that the least affluent parts of society benefit least from the wide range of arts opportunities available in this country.'¹⁴

There is increasing evidence of widening inequality in life chances and opportunities and barriers to progression related to social background and origin. In the focus on 'marginalised groups', public institutions may have paid insufficient attention to the needs of white working class people or those in lower socio-economic groups, which may be just as great as those from

ethnic minority groups. At the same time, little attention has been given to the differences in social mobility within Black and minority ethnic communities. For example there is a great deal of upward social mobility in the Indian community, but very little in others such as the Bangladeshi community.

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Diversions ahead!

In its Cultural Diversity Action Plan 1998–2003, the Arts Council defined cultural diversity as ‘African, Caribbean, Asian and Chinese Arts’. Decibel defined cultural diversity as ‘ethnic diversity resulting from post-war immigration, with an increased focus on British artists of African, Asian and Caribbean descent’. These definitions led Arts Council England to concentrate very intensively on race and ethnicity. It was no surprise that the Arts Council began to intertwine its use of the terms ‘diversity’ and ‘cultural diversity’. However, they are not the same thing, and the latter has become increasingly problematic, particularly if used to describe individuals (‘culturally diverse artists’). Increasingly, we need to ensure that the arts sector is ‘culturally diverse’, meaning that as a whole it reflects a wide range of artists and organisations rather than implying a division between ‘mainstream’ and ‘other’. We will, however, need to continue to monitor our grant giving and recruitment in terms of ethnic origin to ensure the eradication of discrimination and to comply with legislation. As we move forward we will adopt a more sophisticated approach to addressing inequality and discrimination in the arts. We will see a celebration of all the cultures that make up modern British society; mutual respect and understanding of cultural differences; removal of barriers, especially institutional, which prevent active involvement by all; and more diverse audiences and consumers of the arts.

The future will see diversity defined in a broader way that recognises there is a whole set of artificial social and institutional barriers (whether race, faith, ethnicity, age, gender, disability, sexual orientation, social origin or class-based) that prevent arts from being at the centre of a genuinely national life for all groups and communities in the UK.

If I were advising Alice on her journey, I would say to her:

know where you are going
know why you want to be there
care about where you are going
plan your route, map out your journey, read what others
have written
be prepared to change your route
take trusted companions with you

learn from previous journeys, but don't look back
be prepared to meet fellow travellers – company is good
have adequate provisions
take a good insect cream – there are some nasty stings out there
tell your friends and travel again

Most importantly, as Mao Zedong put it ‘A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.’

Notes

1 Exchange between Alice and the Cheshire Cat, in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

2 Hewitt, Peter. (2002), ‘Beyond Boundaries: the arts after the events of 2001’ Speech at the National Portrait Gallery, London. Available on ACE website: www.artscouncil.org.uk/documents/publications/334.pdf

3 Sir William McPherson conducted an inquiry (1997–98) into the unprovoked racist murder of the teenager Stephen Lawrence in London in 1993. Among the inquiry’s conclusions were that ‘Stephen Lawrence’s murder was simply and solely and unequivocally motivated by racism,’ that the police investigation was bungled to the extent that no convictions were secured in public or private prosecutions, and that ‘racism exists within all organisations and institutions, and that it infiltrates the community and starts amongst the very young.’ See www.archive.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm42/4262/4262.htm

4 Bunting, Catherine. (2006), *Social stratification of cultural consumption: A policy response from Arts Council England*. London: Arts Council England.