

# **Towards a Local Culture Index**

Measuring the cultural vitality of communities

François Matarasso



1999

# Towards a Local Culture Index

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First published 1999 by  
Comedia, The Round, Bournes Green, Stroud, Glos. GL6 7NL

Publication sales: Jill Chandler 01509 890068

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Printed by Russell Press, Nottingham

## FOREWORD

Best Value, Performance Indicators, local cultural strategies, regional cultural strategies, cultural consortia. These changes make it difficult for local government to support the arts simply in the belief that to do so is a 'good thing'.

In these days when measures rather than faith have to be applied, the arts are in a precarious position simply because it is so difficult to find suitable measures that truly reflect the value that arts contribute to the quality of life in our communities. This difficulty has been compounded by the inappropriateness of local government boundaries to measurement of arts activity. The activities of an arts organisation are, fortunately, rarely limited to the area of one council, and it would be very disappointing if arts buildings only attracted people from the immediate locality. In many areas of the country, there are cultural quarters which draw support from a wide area around.

Over the last few years some of the most informative, authoritative and stimulating publications on the cultural life of our communities have come from Comedia. This publication is again worthy of being placed in that category. At last we are offered a sensible approach to measurement of the cultural vitality of the community which takes into account the many difficulties that have rendered previous indicators to be dangerously misleading.

I commend this new approach to all local authorities and look forward to the debates and developments of thinking which I am confident will result from giving this publication the attention it richly deserves.

**Chris Heinitz,**  
**Chair, Leisure & Tourism Committee**  
**Local Government Association**

## INTRODUCTION

In March 1998, the National Campaign for the Arts and the Community Development Foundation held a conference in London entitled ‘Creative Communities’ which sought to explore and express the value of the arts in community development. The conference coincided with a growing recognition of the importance of this area by Government—it was addressed by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport the Rt. Hon. Chris Smith MP—by local authorities and by the cultural sector itself. Afterwards, an informal group was convened by the Community Development Foundation to see how these issues might be advanced; it included the National Campaign for the Arts, the Voluntary Arts Network, the Centre for Creative Communities (formerly the British American Arts Association) and Comedia.

The conference identified the absence of any comparative benchmarks for cultural vitality as a critical weakness. Even in Scotland, where cultural provision is a statutory duty of local authorities, there are no general minimum standards of provision (as opposed to professional standards in sectors like museums and libraries). It is therefore possible for local authority spending on the arts to vary widely: in 1996/97, one Scottish council spent £22.31 per capita on the performing arts, compared to 75 pence per capita spent by another.<sup>1</sup> In other areas of leisure provision—notably in sports and recreation facilities—local government has had clear guidance for many years, with positive results for local communities. The issue is not one of enforced uniformity, or regulation, but of accepted standards which cities, towns and rural areas may wish to work towards.

The question therefore arises whether an index of local cultural services could help people know, if not what level of provision they should have, at least what they do have, and how it compares with that of other towns and districts.

This paper is a first attempt at coming to grips with the challenge of developing a Local Culture Index. It is one element in a body of work by Comedia on how the cultural sector can assess and report on its performance with the ultimate aim of renewing the relationship between artists, cultural organisations and society. The ideas outlined here are little more than a sketch of what general indicators might mean in the cultural sector. Although they may be wrong, or impractical, or may even appear dangerous to anyone who still cherishes the romantic ideal of the artist on the margins of society, exploring them will not undermine the creativity and independence of the arts.

On the contrary, the paper’s co-sponsors hope that it will contribute to an understanding of the essential permissive and developmental roles of culture in sustainable communities and local vitality. We believe it can contribute usefully to current debates about performance and accountability initiated by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport. Whether or not these ideas are taken further, we hope that the underlying concepts will at least be useful to cultural organisations thinking about their symbiotic relationship with society.

Two final points should be made. First, the focus of this paper is not on the principles and practice of local arts development, which have been explored elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Instead, it is concerned only with how cultural vitality might be measured and contrasted in different areas. Secondly, as the title indicates, what is presented here is the germ of an idea, not a final proposal. It demands discussion, analysis, planning and thought, before perhaps being tested through pilot studies. The sponsors of the paper therefore invite and welcome responses to it: contact details are listed at the end of the document.

Finally, without the commitment of the Community Development Foundation and the National Campaign for the Arts this paper would not have been written. In particular I should like to thank the members of the 'Creative Communities' group, Gabriel Chanan, Jennifer Edwards, Roger Fox, Alison West and Jennifer Williams, each of whom added insights to the text. Aspects of the paper also reflect a process currently being undertaken by Comedia with Essex County Council to monitor the impact of the arts in the county: I am grateful to all those contributing to that process and to Tim Freathy, the Cultural Services Manager.

**François Matarasso**

**Comedia**

## 1 WHY MEASURE CULTURAL VITALITY?

The right of participation in the cultural life of the community is guaranteed in Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But the United Kingdom is generally a ‘culture-sceptic’ society, certainly in comparison with other European countries where the value of the arts is taken much more for granted—though this, as some European experience suggests, is not always a good thing. Indeed, the absence of any statutory right of access to cultural provision (except in Scotland, and in relation to public libraries) might be seen to confirm the politically marginal position of culture in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Recent debates in this country have therefore tended to focus not on the question of rights, but on the economic and social contribution which the arts and culture can make to broader Government objectives.

The principal issue here is that cultural activity is still seen principally as a goal, rather than a means. Local authorities tend to see theatres, museums and libraries as intrinsic goods, things which any self-respecting place should have. As such, they very often come low on the list of local priorities because of the widespread recognition that schools, social services and housing must come first.<sup>3</sup> But a school is a means of doing something—primarily fostering the education and development of children. As a result we are concerned not merely to have a school for a certain number of local inhabitants: we want the school to achieve clear objectives, to a specified standard, and if it doesn’t, we want to know why. We have little interest in it as an institution: we are concerned about what it achieves for our community. Is there any reason to see cultural provision differently?

This alternative conception is held by Bob McNulty, director of an American community development agency, Partners for Livable Communities, who sees culture as:

‘...the tool that is used to achieve change and is not in competition with people’s lives in terms of their sense of being able to have a secure neighbourhood, of being able to get a job, of being able to have their children be safe on the way home from school. That’s what you never want to compete with. You want to offer culture as a strategy for achieving goals that are keys for people in defining their lives.’<sup>4</sup>

But we are still some way from any general understanding the value of culture as an agent of development. The most comprehensive recent work on assessing community development, undertaken in Northern Ireland by the Scottish Community Development Centre, covers all the areas that might be expected, including economic, social and environmental development, but does not touch on culture except once in reference to ‘satisfaction with community life’.<sup>5</sup> In fact, all the objectives implied in this framework of indicators for community development could be delivered, in part at least, through cultural activity.

### **The value of culture in development**

There is neither the space nor the need to articulate in full the various arguments in favour of community cultural activity, but some brief reminders may be useful:<sup>6</sup>

- Cultural activity is an infinitely diverse route to personal development in people of all ages, leading to enhanced skills, confidence and creativity.
- Culture is a major source of wealth, estimated by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport as representing nearly £60 billion of economic activity annually.<sup>7</sup> The UK's world class creative industries have recorded annual growth above 7% over the past decade and will play a key role in future economic success.
- Cultural action builds community organisational capacity, empowers local groups and nurtures active, engaged citizenship.
- Culture brings people together, in celebration, exploration and community, and is key factor in home and settlement.
- The poet Roderick Watson says that 'identity grows from the stories we tell to ourselves about ourselves': culture is essential to nurturing a confident, cohesive and questioning identity.<sup>8</sup>

Research evidence confirms the practical experience of project participants, arts professionals and people in other disciplines that arts activity can play vital permissive and directly developmental roles in local development strategies by create open and co-operative environments which are important in themselves, and allow other initiatives to succeed. But the response to this growing understanding remains extremely patchy: hence the need for guidance and a structure within which to assess performance against these and other local goals.

### **Accountability**

The Government's focus on accountability in the public sector provides a further reason for trying to formalise the position of culture at local level. It is no longer meaningful to argue simply that the arts are good because they are good: we need more complex, more contextual responses. Government expectations in this respect are explicit in the consultation papers produced by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport following the Comprehensive Spending Review:

We also want to ensure proper accountability and value for money. We have therefore decided to establish a tough new watchdog to monitor and improve standards of efficiency and financial management and promote quality across all our areas of responsibility. The new arrangements will also help ensure that our objectives are being met and that Government investment is directed towards modernisation and reform.<sup>9</sup>

While there is a fundamental obligation to resist state misappropriation or misuse of the arts (or any other mechanism of civic society), the acceptance of public funds surely imposes on artists and cultural organisations a legitimate responsibility to participate in dialogue about their use with the representatives of a democracy. The role of the artist as social or political critic is dignified by history and precedence, but sits uneasily with receipt of Arts Council grants.

At a more prosaic level, the change from Compulsory Competitive Tendering to Best Value as the principle underlying the provision and purchase of local authority services is an associated challenge to better accountability between councils and communities. A Local Cultural Index could provide a framework within which local government could nurture cultural activity alongside community development and improve their accountability in respect of leisure services. It could also foster a new dialogue between all the partners in local development—councils, residents, artists, the voluntary and community sector and others.

If we are to bring culture in from the margins of public policy, to make the most of its capacity to foster community development, and to strengthen the bonds between arts professionals, local authorities and the public, we need a better understanding of what is happening in terms of cultural activity throughout the country. A Local Cultural Index cannot resolve debates about the value of culture in society: but it could at least ensure that they take place in the context of greater knowledge and understanding than at present.



## 2 THE CHALLENGE OF MEASUREMENT

### **Art and/or culture?**

It may have been observed that this paper has used the terms ‘culture’ and ‘the arts’, if not interchangeably, at least without explaining them first. The first problem in trying to develop an index for local cultural activity is to define what we mean by culture. The arts are obviously included in this term, but what else? Museums? Libraries? The built environment? Sport? Language? This is both a philosophical and practical problem which cannot be resolved here. A Local Cultural Index should, in the longer term, adopt a broad and inclusive definition of culture, both because this reflects people’s lived experience and because it coincides with a gradual coming together of the different areas of cultural service provision within local authorities and government. However, the enterprise is difficult, and it seems wiser to adopt an incremental approach in which a limited number of indicators are developed and tested, before adding to them with the benefit of experience. This paper therefore focuses on the arts component of a Local Cultural Index.

### **Inputs, outputs and outcomes**

In 1990 the Office of Arts and Libraries published guidance on performance indicators for public libraries, in which it stated that ‘ideally, one would like to know exactly how the application of public library funds affects the quality of life, learning, work etc. This is not feasible.’<sup>10</sup> Comedia’s recent research has shown that such a collapse in the face of trying to measure the extent and impact of cultural activity is not justified, but considerable difficulties remain. At the heart of these is the relationship between inputs, outputs and outcomes.

When guidance on the provision of open space and sports facilities was drawn up, it was limited to inputs—for example, the National Playing Fields Association standard was six acres per thousand people. The simplicity of such a system was a key to its success, and the standard has long since been exceeded in most places.<sup>11</sup> But equally, this provision is of debatable benefit: inner urban populations have declined sharply in the past 30 years as suburbs with much lower population densities have grown. People’s use of leisure time and their sporting interests have also changed. As a result, playing fields today are sometimes neglected and under-used, except for a few hours a week, and can represent local resources locked into a restrictive use.

It is also evident that the level of inputs does not automatically reflect levels of use, quality or impact. Theatres in neighbouring towns may be run more or less well and consequently may play very roles within the local community. Measuring outputs would go some way towards addressing this problem. If we knew how many seats were sold by each theatre and to whom, or how many education activities were provided, we would begin to be able to make more meaningful comparisons between them. Knowing that one theatre sells fewer tickets than the other does not, of course, mean that it must be worse: there may be good

reasons associated with its policy, artistic vision or local community which would account for the difference. But with output indicators, we would have a better understanding of what was happening.

Even so, we would still be some way from knowing what happened as a result of the investment made and the outputs it produced. Comedia's research into the social impact of cultural activity has contributed to the development of methodologies to assess outcomes, including unplanned or unexpected results. However, the value of being able to account for some of the outcomes of activity in a Local Cultural Index is mitigated by the additional complexity, time and resources required.

The problem here, as in other areas of research, is that the need for accuracy introduces levels of complexity which tend to make the work less achievable. The challenge is to develop an index which is rich enough to be useful, but simple enough to be easily monitored and communicated. It must differentiate between inputs, outputs and outcomes and allow local authorities and communities to assess what benefit they get for their investment and plan accordingly. Such an index might be conceived and constructed in a number of ways: what follows probably errs on the side of complexity.

### 3 A LOCAL CULTURE INDEX

The following paragraphs represent a beginning, not a definitive statement. The indicators suggested are representative; there are certainly omissions of detail and, perhaps, flaws in the underlying concepts. But this first draft of a Local Culture Index lays a foundation for further discussion. The Index itself should be understood to apply to a local authority geographical area.

#### **Input indicators**

##### **Institutions, infrastructure and investment**

An obvious starting point is the number of arts organisations and facilities which exist in the area. These would include theatres, galleries and arts centres, as well as organisations such as dance or theatre companies and so on. The amount of investment and support put into local cultural facilities and activity, especially in terms of public money, is also relevant. The extent of local political commitment to a vibrant cultural life is also relevant. Indicators might include:

- 1 The number of dedicated arts facilities;
- 2 The number of arts organisations of all kinds;
- 3 The number of other facilities used for arts activities;
- 4 The number of arts support organisations, artists and services;
- 5 The amount of local authority expenditure on the arts;
- 6 The amount of national and regional expenditure arts in the district;
- 7 The amount of charitable, sponsorship and other expenditure;
- 8 The number of arts professionals and support workers;
- 9 The existence and range of local authority cultural policy.

##### **Access and distribution**

The actual distribution of arts facilities is highly variable, and an absence may be more apparent than real: there are probably fewer arts organisations and facilities in Buckinghamshire than in Nottingham, but proximity to London probably means that residents of Princes Risborough are at least as well served as those of Nottingham. At the same time, being geographically close does not automatically guarantee access: there are physical, economic and social barriers to participation. It is therefore essential to qualify the infrastructure indicators with a consideration of access. Access and distribution indicators might include:

- 10 The number of facilities within a 30 minute journey time;
- 11 The physical accessibility of arts facilities;
- 12 The pricing, access and outreach policies of arts organisations.

## Output indicators

### Activity and participation

Unless infrastructure and input is translated into activity, not much has been gained, so activity indicators are important signs of the actual vibrancy of local culture. Naturally, these must include the whole spectrum of activity. Although the fact that the voluntary arts sector has been largely ignored by the state in its cultural patronage is not wholly to be deplored—interference always has its price—it has meant that much less attention is given to this activity. Yet most people take part in the arts on a voluntary basis, and the amount of such activity is certainly one of the most important indicators of local cultural vitality. Output indicators, which should include the work of children as well as adults, might include:

- 13 The number of performances, events, exhibition days, workshops etc;
- 14 The number of new commissions, productions and public art works;
- 15 The total numbers of attendances at these events;
- 16 The average capacity for different types of activity.
- 17 The proportion of activity which is independent of subsidy;
- 18 The number and membership of voluntary and community arts groups, and the number of groups established or closing each year;
- 19 The extent of individual participation in cultural activity (e.g. in classes or groups).

### Diversity

We increasingly recognise the complexity of the world in which we live, and the diversity of values and cultures it comprises. Cultural diversity, like economic diversity, is a safeguard of sustainable communities; it is also an aspect of democratic vitality. There is a strong argument for saying that it should be the central principle of cultural policy. Diversity indicators might include:

- 20 Different kinds of cultural traditions active locally;
- 21 The extent of public support for different cultures or forms;
- 22 The composition of the audiences for various activities;
- 23 The extent of links between different cultural traditions.

### Education and training

Many people's engagement with the arts stops during their school years; equally, many adults return to the arts through adult education and community arts opportunities. The tertiary sector is also important in forming new generations of cultural workers and entrepreneurs. The role of the education sector is therefore essential in supporting local cultural activity. Education and training indicators might include:

- 24 The number of art teachers, lecturers and education workers;

- 25 The amount of arts activity supported through schools (within and beyond the curriculum, assessed as pupil hours);
- 26 The nature and extent of tertiary level arts activity, including the number of people studying for arts qualifications;
- 27 Involvement in education by public sector arts organisations.

### **Commercial creative activity**

A further measure of the degree of local cultural vitality is the number of professional artists of all kinds who live there, partly because they add to the opportunities, and partly because they tend to be attracted to settle in culturally lively areas. A recent review by Highlands & Islands Enterprise found 90 artists, craftspeople and writers living within a 15 mile radius of the small town of Tain: valuable evidence of why the Highlands are now the most culturally dynamic part of Scotland after Glasgow and Edinburgh. The ability of an area to sustain creative industries, from sole traders to substantial businesses, is also an important indicator of cultural and economic vitality. Inclusion of the commercial sector as such is more problematic, and yet very important since many people derive a great deal from commercial theatres, cinemas and other cultural venues. Commercial creative activity indicators might include:

- 28 The number of resident artists and craftspeople;
- 29 The number and type of local creative industries;
- 30 The number of commercial arts venues and facilities;
- 31 The combined turnover and employment of the local cultural sector.

### **Outcome indicators**

Much of Comedia's recent research has focused on ways of assessing the impact of arts and cultural investment, and there is almost no end to the questions which can be asked and the indicators which might be used. It may be that measuring the impact of the cultural sector requires another index altogether. There certainly do not appear to be simple, overarching indicators which have any real meaning. In order to illustrate some of the possibilities, some indicators developed by Comedia for a study of community arts in Belfast are given here:<sup>12</sup>

### **Personal development**

- 1 Enhanced levels of self-confidence
- 2 More active social lives
- 3 Greater involvement in community activities
- 4 Take up of community training
- 5 Take up of vocational training & education
- 6 Improved sense of self-image
- 7 Enhanced understanding of rights and responsibilities.
- 8 Identified new skills

- 9 New employment or self-employment

**Community development**

- 10 Intergenerational contact
- 11 Internal community co-operation
- 12 Increased use of city centre
- 13 Reduction in fear of crime
- 14 Community empowerment and capacity-building
- 15 Numbers of people involved in community activities
- 16 Development of organisational skills and capacity
- 17 Development of new community projects
- 18 Participation in local consultations
- 19 Improved image of neighbourhoods
- 20 Environmental improvements
- 21 Audience for arts activity
- 22 Enhanced sense of personal health
- 23 Support for vulnerable groups
- 24 Value of voluntary work

## 4 USING A LOCAL CULTURAL INDEX

There are a number of ways in which a Local Cultural Index could be used. The process of gathering data and reporting would have to be undertaken by a local authority, but there are opportunities here to create strong partnerships with the local community and cultural organisations: the Essex pilot project previously mentioned follows this model.

The value of the indicators is likely to be limited in a single year. They would be much more useful in enabling comparison between authorities and, particularly, in identifying trends, positive and negative, over time. It also has to be recognised that not all these indicators are equally important. One solution would be to develop a points system, so that the more important were 'worth' more; this might encourage a due emphasis on the key performance indicators. It would also be possible to aggregate them to produce a total figure which could be compared to a national average. There are precedents for this from the economic and environmental sectors.

## APPENDIX

### **'Towards a Local Culture Index': Update**

Following publication of this paper in June 1999 a seminar was hosted in London by the Community Development Foundation. There were 18 participants from the arts, local government and community sectors in England, Wales and Scotland, with some apologies from Northern Ireland and elsewhere. The seminar was a first opportunity for people to discuss the ideas in the paper in an informal but structured meeting, and proved to be stimulating and helpful. Its principal conclusion was that the paper made a useful contribution to the emerging debates about the developmental role of the arts, and important issues of evaluation and accountability. It was agreed that the paper should be more widely circulated, with this additional note, and that the logical next step was to identify one or more areas willing to be involved in piloting and developing the index. In addition, a number of points were raised:

- The process is difficult and complicated, but it is worth persevering, especially since there are important connections with 'Best Value'.
- It has relevance to all parts of the UK, but might be articulated differently given the various structures and approaches which exist.
- The Index could be used by local authorities, or by local arts or voluntary organisations concerned about cultural opportunities, though local authority participation would be important.
- There is an critical difference between the data produced by the Index and the conclusions which might be drawn from them.
- There is a tension between trying to identify a few key indicators and avoiding the danger of over-simplification and distortion.
- Some of the indicators which seem simple on the surface (e.g. a local authority cultural policy) would in practice be significant because they would imply that a process or practice was in place.
- There is a need for further thought about arts-specific, as opposed to community development, outputs and outcomes.
- It would also be important to look at how arts indicators might be introduced into other areas of monitoring.
- Opinion polling, already widely used by local authorities, might play a role in measuring people's involvement in and views of culture.



- Meaningful indicators for arts and culture cannot be developed centrally, but need to evolve through a process of local trials and pilots.
- Indicators should combine national, comparable issues with local priorities which are central to the concept of culture.
- The index would be as important for the dialogue which it facilitates about local culture and demands as for the data it produces: it is about steadily working towards improvement, not instant solutions.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Report of the Scottish Arts Council/Convention of Scottish Local Authorities survey of local authority arts expenditure 1996/97, Edinburgh 1998. There is, of course, no simple correlation between the amount spent by local authorities and the outcomes produced: the proximity of Midlothian to the capital may provide some explanation for a reduced need to invest in culture locally.
- <sup>2</sup> Cf. François Matarasso, *Regular Marvels*, CDMF, Leicester, 1994, and *The arts and sport in community development: guiding principles*, a position paper for Social Exclusion Policy Action Team 10, Department of Culture, Media and Sport, London, 1999.
- <sup>3</sup> In fact, opportunities for participation in culture and leisure are important to people: recent research by the University of York found that poor leisure facilities were the third most important reason for neighbourhood dissatisfaction, seen by 15% of people as a major problem compared to crime (22%) and dogs (16%). Roger Burrows and David Rhodes, *Unpopular places?: Area disadvantage and the geography of misery in England*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation findings 118, October 1998.
- <sup>4</sup> Bob McNulty, 'Building Successful Communities' in *The Art of Regeneration*, ed. François Matarasso and Steven Halls, Nottingham City Council & Comedia, 1996, p. 23.
- <sup>5</sup> Alan Barr, Stuart Hashagen & Rod Purcell (1996) *Monitoring and Evaluation of Community Development in Northern Ireland*, Department of Health & Social Services, Belfast, p.63.
- <sup>6</sup> For more detailed accounts of the developmental value of culture, see Bernard Casey, Rachael Dunlop & Sara Selwood, *Culture as Commodity? The economics of the arts and built heritage in the UK*, Policy Studies Institute, London 1996, François Matarasso *Use or Ornament?*, Comedia, Stroud 1997 and *Creative Scotland: The case for a national cultural strategy*, Scottish Arts Council et al., Edinburgh 1998.
- <sup>7</sup> *Creative Industries Mapping Document*, DCMS, London 1998
- <sup>8</sup> Quoted in Scottish Arts Council *Annual Report and Accounts 1996/97*, p.24, SAC 1997.
- <sup>9</sup> *The Comprehensive Spending Review: a new approach to investment in culture, consultation documents*, DCMS, London 1998.
- <sup>10</sup> *Keys to Success: Performance Indicators for Public Libraries*, OAL, 1990, quoted in Sanjiv Lingayah, Alex McGillivray and Peter Raynard (1996) *Creative Accounting: Beyond the Bottom Line*, Comedia, Stroud. The Audit Commission has since halted its work on developing performance indicators for local authority arts provision.
- <sup>11</sup> Ken Worpole and Liz Greenhalgh (1995) *Park Life, Urban Parks and Social Renewal*, Comedia Stroud, p.22.
- <sup>12</sup> François Matarasso, with John Chell (1998) *Vital Signs, Mapping Community Arts in Belfast*, Stroud: Comedia, p. 33-34.