



Disconnected Bodies

PROVE IT!

MEASURING SOCIALLY
ENGAGED PRACTICE

ART WITHOUT DISCOVERY MOVES NOBODY

Disconnected Bodies: A social enterprise working to improve access to the arts, culture and heritage.

Supporting innovative people and projects: we help people choose, create, or take part in bold and brilliant arts experiences.

Widening cultural access and democratising the arts: the arts must remain a force for public good.

Advising on cultural audience engagement and securing funding: we work for those who most require the help; tackling industry gate-keeping and discriminatory practices to amplify voices.



19 years

Changing the face of cultural audience engagement and contributing our expertise to enabling more people to choose, create and participate in brilliant cultural experiences.



15 countries

Improving access to the arts and culture in 15 countries across the United Kingdom, Europe and Africa.



720,000 audiences

Reached in 2024. 375,000 being first time attenders.



2.1 million people

Engaged digitally in 2024.



8 national research projects

5 international research projects.



764 hours

Free advice provided in 2024.



“At DisconnectedBodies, we champion inclusive cultural access—empowering communities through bold engagement, free expert guidance, and equitable arts participation. Join us in transforming who the arts serve and how they connect us”.

- Pablo Colella, Founder

CULTURE: A CATALYST FOR TRANSFORMATION

At Disconnected Bodies, we believe in the power of arts and culture to catalyse real, lasting transformation in towns and cities.

This isn't just about regeneration; it's about unlocking the potential of place and people through a deeply rooted, locally led cultural strategy.

As an organisation that supports councils and cultural ecosystems across the UK, we help towns embed creativity at the heart of their development strategies.

Our approach recognises what we champion: that cultural participation fosters stronger, more connected communities, improves wellbeing, supports educational outcomes, and builds inclusive economies. With the creative industries contributing over £111 billion annually to the UK economy, investment in this sector isn't a luxury—it's a necessity for future resilience.

This kind of transformation isn't theoretical—it's happening. And at Disconnected Bodies, we exist to support councils to design, implement, and sustain similar cultural strategies. Whether through co-created public art, reimagined public spaces, or cultural programmes that reflect local identity and tackle inequality, we work side-by-side with local authorities to turn vision into action.

But we also understand the challenges.

COVID-19 reshaped the creative landscape, exposing systemic vulnerabilities—especially for freelancers, emerging artists, and underrepresented communities.

Our strategic advice doesn't shy away from these realities. It acknowledges deep inequities, and outlines a path forward that is both inclusive and justice-focused; mirroring our commitment to co-designing systems that elevate marginalised voices and redistribute creative power.

We've been able to demonstrate what's possible when a town embraces arts and culture not as an add-on, but as a foundation for change.

We're here to activate local potential, build cultural infrastructure, and centre communities in the stories they tell about who they are—and who they want to become.

Let's reimagine together.

AN INTRODUCTION TO SOCIALLY ENGAGED PRACTICE

Creating meaningful social impact is a shared goal across arts and cultural organisations: to develop projects that engage communities and generate real value. Over the past decade, values-led and socially engaged practice, often supported through project funding, has become central to the sector. This makes understanding and measuring social impact relevant to nearly every aspect of how arts and cultural work is designed and delivered.

We're all thinking about change; whether that's the difference we want to make with the communities we collaborate with, or how we want our organisations to evolve. Increasingly, the most successful funding applications come from organisations that can demonstrate strong project planning, a clear theory of change, and the ability to make smaller-scale projects deliver long-term impact.

Measuring social impact isn't always straightforward; effects can be far-reaching and last months or even years after a project ends.

Quantifying social impact can be difficult, so qualitative approaches, like participant interviews and testimonies, should be used.

Qualitative methods bring their own challenges and require careful ethical consideration.

When we talk about this work in arts and culture, we mean the ways in which organisations and projects can influence positive change and foster meaningful relationships between staff, participants, and communities, enriching the lives of everyone involved. Cultural work can create impact in many forms, from strengthening communities to inspiring personal growth.

Just as arts organisations often report on economic or environmental impact, social impact can, and should, be clearly articulated to give a fuller picture of the value of arts and cultural work.

At the same time, there's growing awareness of virtue signalling across the sector. Some organisations highlight social initiatives more for reputation than for genuine engagement or change. Recognising this is important: authentic social impact requires deliberate planning, meaningful participation, and a commitment to real outcomes, not just ticking a box or generating publicity.

ALIGNING PROJECTS WITH PURPOSE AND MEASURING IMPACT

The social impact you aim to achieve can be defined at an organisational level through your mission, values, vision, or Theory of Change. Projects should align with the organisation's mission, values, and vision. This alignment can be achieved by defining clear outcomes and outputs that contribute to broader organisational goals.

Outcomes are at the heart of your work. They capture the positive changes or improvements your project aims to bring about and guide what you will measure when evaluating social impact. Some outcomes may span beyond a single project, with individual activities contributing only in part. Taking this long-term view can strengthen both the project itself and the wider organisation.

Outputs are the concrete actions or activities you carry out to achieve your outcomes. They form the foundation for creating your evaluation framework and monitoring progress toward the changes you hope to make.

Example

<p>Objective: Enhanced community engagement and creative skills, enabling participants to co-create new artworks and cultural experiences that reflect local stories and perspectives.</p>	<p>Outputs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A series of 8 co-creation workshops involving local artists and community members• Participation of over 120 community members from diverse backgrounds• Creation of 15 new artworks inspired by participants' personal and community experiences• 5 public exhibitions showcasing the co-created artworks in local cultural spaces• Collaboration with 6 local schools and youth organisations to extend creative learning opportunities• Training sessions for 10 emerging artists to develop skills in community engagement• Development of a dedicated project website to share artwork, stories, and creative processes with a wider audience• Production of a digital toolkit to guide future community co-creation projects and ensure sustainability
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METHODS OF MEASURING SOCIAL IMPACT

Once your outputs and outcomes are defined, the next step is to decide how you will measure progress against them. To do this well, you'll need a clear and well-structured evaluation plan, designed specifically for your project and drawing on a mix of the tools outlined in this section.

You'll also need to decide whether the evaluation will be carried out internally or by an external evaluator, and budget accordingly. It's a common misconception that in-house evaluation is always more affordable, or that external evaluation is automatically more rigorous; neither assumption is necessarily accurate.

Before committing to a specific approach, check whether local partners already use an evaluation framework that could be adapted to your needs. This can make it easier to share and compare insights across different organisations and sectors.

Finally, think about how your project-specific evaluation can connect with your organisation's long-term measurement goals. For instance, are there shared questions or metrics you could use to contribute to longitudinal data, or ways to gather insight while reducing the burden on participants?

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Evaluation offers valuable insights, but also carries risks if used without careful consideration. Relying too heavily on numbers can lead to oversimplified assumptions about people's lives, while poorly planned qualitative approaches can damage trust or cause emotional harm.

Limitations of Quantitative Data

Quantitative data can be useful for establishing baselines, but it doesn't capture the full picture.

- Postcodes may suggest economic disadvantage but reveal nothing about personal circumstances.
- Metrics often focus on deficits, which can reinforce negative narratives.
- Evaluators should reflect on whether these measures unintentionally undermine the project's aims.

Designing Qualitative Approaches with Care

Participant needs should be at the centre of any qualitative data gathering.

- Recognise that some people—especially those with past experiences in systems of care—may be cautious about sharing information.
- Allow flexibility in responses, such as leaving questions blank or answering later.
- Build trust before requesting personal details.
- Avoid intimidating or overly complex language in questionnaires or interviews.

Being Transparent with Participants

Clear communication builds trust.

- Explain the purpose of your evaluation, how the data will be used, and what participation involves.
- Use plain, accessible language in consent forms and information sheets.
- Example: Encountering the Unexpected project by the University of Leicester made all processes transparent for participants.

Choosing the Right Format

Select tools and formats that suit your audience.

- Decide if questionnaires should be self-led or facilitated.
- Consider accessibility—technology like online surveys may increase reach but can also create barriers.
- Ensure chosen methods do not conflict with your project's purpose or alienate participants.

Caring for Staff and Evaluators

Evaluation can be emotionally demanding, particularly in sensitive contexts.

- Even with thorough preparation—risk assessments, background research, and procedures—interviewing can be challenging.
- Protect the wellbeing of both staff and participants throughout the process.

WHEN TO MEASURE

Measuring social impact is not a one-off activity; it should run throughout the life of a project, providing insight, direction, and the ability to adapt when needed. In the early planning phase, gathering baseline data helps set achievable outcomes and gives you a reference point for later comparison. As the project unfolds, regular assessment, using quantitative methods, qualitative approaches, or both, allows you to monitor progress, refine strategies, and respond to new developments.

Front-end evaluation, carried out before the project begins or in its earliest stages, works directly with target audiences and stakeholders to understand existing knowledge, perceptions, and needs. It not only informs your starting point but also invites participants into the process from the outset, increasing ownership and engagement. Qualitative approaches often work best for uncovering these early insights.

Formative evaluation happens once the project is underway but still early enough to make meaningful adjustments. It focuses on identifying the most effective ways to reach your outcomes, checking that activities are on track, and making changes if needed. In socially engaged practice, it also enables participants to take a deeper role in guiding the project's direction.

Summative evaluation typically occurs towards the end of the project cycle. Its purpose is to assess whether the intended outcomes have been met, using indicators and evidence gathered throughout the project. This often involves comparing final data to the baseline or front-end measures, sometimes using the very same techniques, to ensure changes can be clearly demonstrated.



BOOK A FREE 30-MINUTE VIDEO CONSULTATION

Book a free 30-minute consultancy call and speak with Disconnected Bodies' Founder Pablo Colella.

We pride ourselves on offering free, no strings attached advice. Book a day and time that suits you then leave it to us to get you moving past sticking points and towards your goals.

Don't want to wait? Give our team a call on 020 3633 7617

