

Disconnected Bodies

MAXIMISING SOCIAL VALUE IN THE ARTS

A HANDS ON GUIDE



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.

FOREWORD

Organisations in the arts, culture, and heritage sectors increasingly need to demonstrate social value as part of funding agreements, partnerships, and commissioned projects. This expectation mirrors government and public-sector procurement policies which encourage organisations to leverage their work for wider community and environmental benefit. For cultural organisations like Disconnected Bodies, this means embedding social, creative, and heritage impact into the way projects are planned, delivered, and evaluated.

Social value in the arts is broad and multifaceted. It includes nurturing local communities through participatory public art, supporting emerging artists' careers, creating inclusive and accessible cultural experiences, and fostering environmentally sustainable practices within projects and operations. Importantly, social value should build on the unique expertise and creative strengths of the organisation and should go beyond standard corporate responsibility initiatives.

Disconnected Bodies has worked closely with arts institutions, local authorities, and cultural networks to understand how arts and heritage organisations can deliver meaningful social value. When approached thoughtfully, rather than as a tick-box exercise, social value can enhance both the cultural and societal impact of projects.

For arts organisations, managing social value efficiently is crucial. Resources must be allocated strategically to ensure that the benefits to communities, participants, and artists are maximised without inflating project costs unnecessarily. Effective management ensures that social, cultural, and economic returns on investment are balanced, supporting organisational sustainability while generating meaningful impact for audiences and participants.

This handbook provides practical guidance on planning, budgeting, and reporting social value within arts, culture, and heritage projects. Drawing on research and sector experience, it focuses on partnerships and collaborations that harness resources and creative expertise in innovative ways. The aim is to help organisations embed social value at the heart of their work; enhancing community engagement, supporting artist development, and creating public art and co-creation experiences that leave a lasting legacy.

CLEAR, CONCRETE, LOCAL: THE PILLARS OF SOCIAL VALUE IN THE ARTS

Through our extensive experience working with arts organisations, cultural institutions, local authorities, and community partners, we have identified three core principles for embedding social value in arts and culture projects, ensuring meaningful, lasting impact.

Clear and Purposeful

Social value initiatives should be clearly linked to the specific project or programme. These are deliberate investments in community engagement, artist development, audience inclusion, and collaborative public art projects, where there is demonstrable benefit to participants, communities, and cultural ecosystems during the project's lifetime.

Concrete and Measurable

Too often, arts and cultural proposals include broad, high-level statements about social value that are unrealistic or impossible to deliver. The most effective projects outline tangible activities, with named partners, defined collaboration structures, dedicated budgets, and measurable outcomes. This specificity shows commitment and builds trust with funding bodies, partners, and communities alike.

Locally Rooted and Sustainable

Even if an arts organisation is working outside its immediate area, social value should be locally meaningful. Collaborating with local cultural groups, schools, community organisations, and artists ensures that projects are contextually relevant. Focusing on skills exchange, joint programming, and partnerships helps embed the organisation in the community. Because cultural projects often have long-term effects, initiatives should aim to leave a sustainable legacy that benefits local communities and creative ecosystems well beyond the project's duration.

Clear, concrete, and locally rooted approaches are essential for creating sustainable social value in arts and culture. By following these principles, organisations can deliver projects that strengthen communities, support artists' careers, and generate lasting cultural impact.

SOCIAL VALUE STRATEGY IN ARTS AND CULTURE

Social value starts with strategy—but in the arts and cultural sector, this can feel complex. Social impact is a relatively new focus for many organisations, yet developing a strategy should not delay taking meaningful action. Cultural organisations will never be “fully ready”; they become stronger and more effective by acting, learning, and adapting over time.

We recommend an agile approach: plan iteratively, take tangible actions, and integrate social value into all aspects of your creative work. Rather than waiting to perfect a strategy, begin implementing initiatives; such as community co-creation, public engagement projects, or artist development programmes, and use their real-world outcomes to refine future strategy. Measuring and reporting on impact is essential, helping shape decisions and deepen your organisation’s cultural and social contribution.

Aligning Your Strategy with Projects and Funding

Even if your organisation already has social practices or frameworks, project or funding-specific social value should be aligned with your overarching strategy.

A successful social value strategy matches your organisation’s mission, strengths, and creative expertise to the priorities of each project or tender. This ensures that strategic goals and practical actions reinforce one another, creating a coherent approach that maximises social, cultural, and community impact. In the arts, this could mean linking your creative programming to local education initiatives, supporting emerging artists, or delivering public artworks that leave a lasting legacy.

LEVERAGING RESOURCES FOR CULTURAL IMPACT AND PROJECT SUSTAINABILITY

Key questions to consider:

- What resources, financial, creative, or human, will you use to achieve meaningful cultural and social outcomes?
- How will you structure your budget to support project or funding-specific social value activities?
- When collaborating with local artists, community organisations, cultural institutions, or socially-minded suppliers, how will you allocate resources effectively to build lasting impact?

Resources extend beyond monetary contributions. In the arts and culture sector, they include:

- Creative contributions such as artist time, workshops, performances, and public art installations.
- Volunteering and skills sharing, both professional (mentoring, training) and general support.
- Partnership leverage, where collaborations with other cultural or social value organisations amplify your impact.
- Internal management, including staff time, systems, and operational costs necessary to deliver, track, and report on social value.

Project-related budgets are often provisional; activated only once your organisation secures a commission or funding. This also shapes where and how your social value activities are delivered.

Be tender-ready

Ensure you have all relevant cultural, ethical, and industry certifications in place. These form the foundation for delivering credible, value-added activities and creative interventions.

Impact, legacy, and continuity

What lasting cultural or social impact will your work leave in the community? How can your contributions, whether through public co-creation, training local artists, or community arts initiatives, continue to benefit the area after the project ends?

Strategic partnerships and carefully allocated resources, both financial and creative, can strengthen local cultural ecosystems and ensure your legacy endures.

HARNESSING LOCAL CULTURAL AND COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES

Every arts and culture organisation holds resources; creative, financial, and human, that can be harnessed to generate meaningful social value. These resources will vary depending on your artistic discipline, organisational scale, and the nature of your projects. Social value offers an opportunity to channel your skills, cultural knowledge, and influence to deliver benefits beyond the core artistic output.

How can you strengthen the communities you work with?

Your resources may include:

- Financial contributions such as commissioning fees for local artists, small grants to community groups, or co-funding for cultural initiatives.
- Skills and expertise, from curatorial knowledge and heritage interpretation to performance training and community facilitation.
- Volunteering and mentoring, both skilled (e.g. professional development for emerging creatives) and general support.
- In-kind contributions, such as free use of rehearsal or exhibition space, technical support, or access to creative equipment.

Often, the most effective approach combines several of these resources into a single, well-designed package of support. In arts and culture, social value for commissioned or funded work can be considered across four broad pillars: community engagement, artist development, cultural access, and environmental sustainability.

Partnership models with local cultural organisations, grassroots creative groups, and heritage charities can contribute to all of these pillars without the need to build extensive in-house delivery capacity. These partners are often deeply embedded in their communities, with established trust and insight into local needs. Strategic collaboration ensures that your contribution is locally relevant, culturally resonant, and efficient.

It's important to remember that partnerships for place-based work may be defined by project location or commissioning requirements. The registered address of an arts organisation is not always where its cultural or community impact is most strongly felt—so mapping partners by beneficiaries, not just location, can help maximise social value.

THE FUTURE OF SOCIAL VALUE IN ARTS, CULTURE, AND HERITAGE

The adoption of the Social Value Model and various local frameworks has produced both successes and challenges in the cultural sector. As the arts, culture, and heritage community continues to embed social value into its projects and partnerships, the focus must now shift from compliance to meaningful impact; refining guidelines, delivery models, and evaluation methods so that the potential of these policies is fully realised.

One thing is clear: tick-box exercises cannot deliver the transformative cultural and social change communities need. The resources allocated to social value in arts and culture must be used creatively, strategically, and transparently to address urgent social and environmental challenges while enriching cultural life.

We propose key improvement areas for the sector:

Looking Past the Numbers

Calculations can estimate impact but rarely capture the full value of cultural work. For example, the benefit of an artist-led mentoring programme depends on who participates, the depth of engagement, context, and skills involved. Reducing this to a financial figure risks overlooking its true human and cultural legacy.

Valuing Cultural and Community Partnerships

Partnerships with local and national VCSEs in culture and heritage provide lasting value. Their knowledge and relationships ensure benefits continue after projects end. Collaboration can include co-created public art, heritage in schools, inclusive programmes, or support for local creative enterprises.

Multiple Paths to Cultural Impact

Social value delivery varies by organisation size, artform, and location. For example, while some work directly in communities, others, like touring or digital groups, contribute through online training, shared resources, or grants.

Making Social Value Commitments Clear

We expect a stronger distinction between standard responsibilities and project-specific commitments. The latter should have clear, place-based plans. The future of social value will belong to those who embed creativity, collaboration, and community benefit into all stages of their work.



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

