



Disconnected Bodies

# NO VOICE LEFT BEHIND

A REFLECTIVE GUIDE TO  
PARTICIPATORY PRACTICE

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# 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

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# 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.

# CO-CREATING CULTURAL PRACTICE

This framework has been developed by Disconnected Bodies to support arts, culture and heritage organisations in building more meaningful, equitable, and sustainable relationships with the communities they exist to serve. Rooted in collaborative and embodied approaches, it offers practical tools and guiding principles for improving participatory practice across the cultural sector.

The aim is to establish shared benchmarks of best practice, celebrate excellence in co-creation and community-led work, and strengthen the role of arts and heritage organisations as responsive, inclusive spaces for collective expression, memory, and change.

Whether you're an artist, cultural worker, curator, producer or policymaker, this framework is designed to help you reflect, learn, and embed deeper community engagement into your everyday practice. It also provides a common language for practitioners, funding bodies and stakeholders committed to more just and accountable ways of working.

As more arts and heritage organisations seek to move beyond extractive models of engagement toward reciprocal, care-based collaborations, this framework offers:

- A working definition of participatory cultural practice
- A guide to the values, conditions and principles that underpin this work
- A flexible structure to assess and develop your current engagement practice

Developed with input from a UK-wide network of artists, cultural leaders, community organisers and funding bodies, and grounded in conversations with over 20 professionals working at the intersection of participation, identity and power, **this framework invites you to commit to a more inclusive, anti-oppressive approach to cultural practice.**

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# WHAT DOES COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION LOOK LIKE IN ARTS, CULTURE AND HERITAGE SPACES?

Community participation can take many forms; from early-stage collaborations where organisations are just beginning to build relationships, to long-term partnerships grounded in trust, care, and shared decision-making. Wherever you are on this journey, certain principles and values remain central to meaningful participation.

## Cornerstones of Practice

- Collaborating *with* communities, rather than acting *on behalf of* or *for* them
- Involving communities in shaping both specific projects and broader organisational direction
- Cultivating shared ownership between community members and cultural institutions
- Embracing change as a mutual process that affects everyone involved, including the organisation itself
- Embedding participation across the whole organisation, not isolating it in outreach or education
- Making it part of your central mission, not an optional add-on
- Prioritising people and relationships above programmes or outputs
- Actively listening to and amplifying voices from outside the institution
- Ensuring benefits are reciprocal; for both communities and the organisation

## Markers of Integrity

- Commitment to reflection, critical thinking and ethical practice
- Approaching participation as a process of ongoing learning
- Willingness, at both individual and organisational levels, to be changed by the work
- Accepting uncertainty, risk and even failure as part of the journey
- Supporting participation that is forward-thinking, ambitious and evolving
- Enabling genuine involvement, not tokenism
- Practising equity at every level

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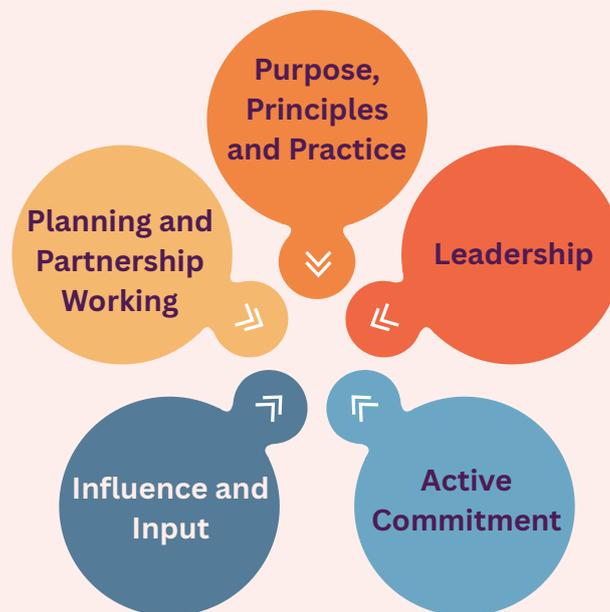
# A REFLECTIVE FRAMEWORK

The framework that follows is intended as a light touch introduction to support reflection on current participation practices and identify opportunities for development.

It can be used to:

- Assess current practice
- Define future aspirations
- Plan practical steps towards deeper engagement

It should guide constructive conversations, generate new ideas, and help embed community-centred practice across the organisation.



We invite you to use this guide alongside our **Prove It! Measuring Socially Engaged Practice** guidelines to help you both develop your participatory approaches and evaluate their impact.

Together, these resources provide a practical framework for embedding, assessing, and improving socially engaged cultural work.

## PURPOSE, PRINCIPLES, AND PRACTICE

|                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| <b>Emerging</b>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mission statement includes some reference to community engagement or participation</li> <li>• Organisational values acknowledge the importance of working with communities</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Developing</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mission statement explicitly promotes participation and community connection</li> <li>• Values reflect core principles such as inclusion, fairness, equality and openness</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Established</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mission and values actively guide the organisation's approach to community engagement across all areas of work</li> <li>• Participation is embedded, not peripheral</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Exemplary</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mission is co-created and reviewed with community partners</li> <li>• Staff and trustees use the mission to lead and advocate for participation</li> <li>• Organisation champions community-led practice and contributes learning to the wider sector</li> <li>• Values are lived, not just stated—they shape all decisions and direction</li> </ul> |

## LEADERSHIP

|                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| <b>Emerging</b>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership shows a passive or minimal commitment to community engagement and participation</li> <li>• Trustees are aware of engagement work but are not actively involved</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Developing</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some leaders understand and advocate for the importance of community participation</li> <li>• Trustees understand why engagement matters and begin to support its development</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Established</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The leadership team consistently champions participation across the organisation</li> <li>• Trustees actively support participation and are given training to deepen their understanding</li> <li>• Community engagement is embedded in trustee induction and governance conversations</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Exemplary</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leaders champion participation both internally and in public-facing spaces</li> <li>• Leaders collaborate with community partners at events and in shared decision-making</li> <li>• Trustees advocate for community-led practice within and beyond the organisation</li> <li>• Community voices are included at governance level, with representation on the board</li> </ul> |

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## ACTIVE COMMITMENT

|                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
| <b>Emerging</b>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Funding for community-led work is primarily secured through one-off project grants</li> <li>• Participation takes place on a short-term basis with ad hoc or temporary partners</li> </ul>                                      |
| <b>Developing</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A core organisational budget is allocated to support ongoing community engagement</li> <li>• Partnerships are longer-term and planned with community collaborators</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Established</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community engagement is built into business and strategic plans and financially supported across departments</li> <li>• Collaborative work with communities is sustained throughout the organisation</li> </ul>                 |
| <b>Exemplary</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participation is central to strategic and financial planning and used to influence funders, stakeholders, and policy</li> <li>• The organisation nurtures long-term, equitable relationships with community partners</li> </ul> |

## INFLUENCE AND INPUT

|                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
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## PLANNING AND PARTNERSHIP WORKING

|                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| <b>Emerging</b>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Community engagement is planned mainly by staff or a dedicated engagement team</li><li>• Partners are consulted only on pre-designed programmes and activities</li><li>• Partnerships are one-off, project-based</li></ul>  |
| <b>Developing</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Leadership, trustees, and staff are jointly involved in planning community participation</li><li>• Systems exist for partners to contribute to decision-making on specific exhibitions or time-limited projects</li><li>• Community partners are supported to engage meaningfully</li></ul>   |
| <b>Established</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Leadership, trustees, and staff work together with community partners as part of organisation-wide strategic planning</li><li>• Partners have a say in decisions across different areas of work, not just projects</li><li>• Relationships extend beyond single projects into long-term collaboration</li></ul>   |
| <b>Exemplary</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Strategic and business planning includes community partners at the highest decision-making levels (e.g., representation on the board)</li><li>• Participation is seen as a shared responsibility across the organisation, with mutual respect, clear roles, and effective feedback systems</li><li>• Partners maintain strong, ongoing relationships and contribute to both short- and long-term planning</li></ul> |

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# FROM PRINCIPLES TO PRACTICE

Many cultural organisations already collaborate closely with their communities, but there's always space to go further. The following approaches and resources can help strengthen the key elements of this framework.

## Collaboration and Co-Ownership

A strong sign of successful participatory practice is when communities are meaningfully involved in governance, co-decision-making, and shared accountability; working alongside the organisation to set priorities, track progress, and evaluate outcomes.

Ways to bring community voices into strategic planning include:

- **Representation on governing bodies** – Invite community partners to join your board or equivalent governance group. Their role isn't to "represent" a whole community or their own organisation, but to contribute skills, knowledge, and perspectives as engaged trustees. This can diversify leadership, enrich discussions, and help ensure community priorities are not overlooked.
- **Advisory panels and participatory forums** – Establish spaces for community partners to engage with different aspects of your work and feed into strategic conversations. These groups can add specialist insight and report back to leadership, keeping decision-making grounded in lived experience.
- **Co-created strategy workshops** – Bring together staff, trustees, volunteers, stakeholders, and community partners to shape long-term organisational direction. Collaborative planning builds trust, alignment, and shared ownership of the vision.

## Learning and Demonstrating Change

At the heart of participation is reflective practice; both internally and in collaboration with communities. This means taking time to question your own actions, recognise successes, identify areas for growth, and be open to change. Reflection is about learning, not blame, and it thrives in environments where listening, openness, and constructive challenge are valued.

Practical ways to embed reflection into everyday work include:

- **Regular debate and dialogue** – Create spaces for staff, community partners, and sector peers to exchange perspectives, share feedback, and challenge assumptions.
- **Formal debriefs** – Review projects and programmes with community partners, focusing on lessons learned and shared goals.
- **Integrated reflection in team meetings** – Go beyond operational updates by asking reflective questions such as "What went well this month?" and "What could have been better?" Encourage honest, non-judgemental sharing.
- **Empowered teams** – When staff understand and are invested in your strategic aims, managers can give them more autonomy. This reduces the need for meetings to get bogged down in operational detail, making space for more reflective, values-based discussion.



## 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**

