

Shaping a fairer cultural future

Contributing to the 2025 Arts Council England review

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Disconnected Bodies

A social enterprise working to improve access to the arts, culture and heritage through audience insight and cultural engagement.

www.disconnectedbodies.co

ART WITHOUT DISCOVERY MOVES NOBODY.

Shaping cultural strategy through cultural audience insight and research.

Supporting cultural organisations, councils, and artist-run initiatives to develop audience-first, insight-led engagement strategies, alongside ACE and NLHF aligned research and evaluation.

The UK's only arts audience psychology consultants

We help people choose, create, and take part in bold and brilliant arts experiences through audience strategies that lead to meaningful and lasting cultural transformation.

Cultural access and democratising the arts

The arts must remain a force for public good; tackling industry gate-keeping and discriminatory practices to amplify voices, broaden participation, and ensure better cultural opportunities for all people.

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At **Disconnected Bodies**, 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 it connects us.

ABOUT US



ARTS AND CULTURE SOCIAL ENTERPRISE WINNER 2025

We're proud to have won the Arts and Culture Social Enterprise 2025 (London) Award, recognising our commitment to meaningful cultural engagement across the UK.

Trusted by Arts Council England and Heritage Fund funded clients.

- 20+ years' experience
- Working across 14 countries
- 2.1 million people reached

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. At Disconnected Bodies, we exist to support councils to design, implement, and sustain similar cultural strategies. Whether through co-created public art, reimaged 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. Recent years have 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.

CONTRIBUTING TO THE 2025 ACE REVIEW

We believe strongly in the need for greater investment in culture, and we wanted to be clear that suggested improvements should never be used as justification for cuts. For us, it was a chance to reflect honestly on how cultural support could develop, and how it could remain a foundation for a fairer, healthier society.

Our contribution focused on one key recommendation: adopting a more locally rooted and place-aware approach to cultural investment. In addition, we highlighted the need to rethink how audiences are understood; moving away from static census data and generic segmentation models, and towards community-driven, qualitative insight that captures lived experience, strengthens engagement, and supports equitable and effective use of funding.



A LETTER TO ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

Dear Arts Council England,

I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this review. In my opinion, sustained investment in culture is essential, and I feel strongly that discussions around improvement should never become a reason to justify cuts. For me, this process is about reflection on how cultural support can evolve and how it can continue to underpin a fair and healthy society.

From my experience, one of the most urgent steps forward is to adopt a more place-aware approach to cultural investment. I have seen firsthand how the current system can create barriers. Geography, economic inequality, and limited infrastructure often prevent people, especially in rural areas, from accessing cultural opportunities or developing creative careers. In my view, the centralised and competitive model makes these challenges even harder to overcome.

I notice that national cultural bodies can sometimes feel distant. In conversations with peers and communities, the lack of regional presence is a recurring theme. In my experience, having more locally embedded roles, clearer points of contact, and regular participation in regional forums would make these bodies far more accessible and relevant. It would also show a willingness to act not only as funding bodies, but as genuine partners in cultural development.

I believe strongly in the value of a place-based approach. From my work, I have seen how community-rooted organisations can act as anchors, building trust, growing capacity, and bringing in further investment. In my opinion, these hubs demonstrate how targeted support can nurture talent, strengthen communities, and deliver long-term benefits that go well beyond the arts sector.

It's essential to distinguish between professional practice and wider participation. Both are vital, but they need different forms of support and evaluation. Community-led and participative culture has a profound impact on wellbeing and social connection, and I believe this deserves to be recognised and resourced on its own terms, alongside professional artistic practice.

From my experience, conventional audience metrics, such as census data and standard segmentation models, often fail to capture the complexities of how people engage with culture. Census data is static, outdated, and rarely reflects lived experiences, motivations, or barriers. Relying on these sources alone can misrepresent audience needs, under-serve marginalised communities, and create pressure to justify funding based on incomplete evidence. I have also seen how some organisations promote generic segmentation models while charging publicly funded cultural bodies for access to these services, which I believe is detrimental to understanding real audiences and equitable engagement.

In my opinion, prioritising qualitative, community-driven insight is far more effective. Engaging directly with audiences through conversations, co-creation, participatory evaluation, and collaborative feedback allows cultural organisations to design programmes that are relevant, accessible, and meaningful. From my experience, this approach strengthens relationships with communities, encourages long-term engagement, and ensures resources are targeted where they are most needed. Moving away from over-reliance on census or commercialised segmentation data could also ease pressures on funding by enabling more strategic, evidence-based decisions that reflect actual community needs.

In my opinion, five areas of action could make a real difference:

- **Locally shaped strategies:** Work with partners in each area to set cultural goals, with funding tied to local outcomes.
- **Strengthening community anchors:** Support trusted organisations not just as deliverers, but as convenors and capacity-builders.
- **Collaborative networks:** Help practitioners connect, share learning, and build resilience across regions.
- **Evidence that reflects place:** Develop frameworks that show culture's impact on wellbeing and inclusion, balancing local and national priorities.
- **Defining national roles:** Clarify how Arts Council England works with government, local authorities, and other institutions to strengthen support at community level.

I share these thoughts in a spirit of collaboration. From my perspective, the future of cultural investment lies in recognising the specific needs of places and the people who live in them. In my opinion, by working together we can create a cultural framework that feels fairer, more inclusive, and more connected to communities everywhere.

Yours sincerely,
Pablo Colella

BARRIERS WITHIN THE CURRENT SYSTEM

We see stark inequalities in cultural access across the country. Geography, financial disadvantage, rural isolation and systemic exclusion all combine to create a funding system that tends to favour those with existing privilege and connections. In rural areas these barriers are heightened; limited transport, lack of provision, and weak infrastructure make it harder for people to participate or build careers in the arts. A centralised, competitive approach risks entrenching these inequalities rather than reducing them.

At present, too much depends on a market-driven model. This narrows the scope of cultural investment, limits long-term vision, and weakens the ability to leverage wider resources for broader social good. We believe it is time to shift towards an approach that places culture within a wellbeing economy, not simply as an industry.

Local connections and visibility

Shaping place through culture

Valuing everyday participation



A SHIFT IN AUDIENCE STRATEGY

From our experience at Disconnected Bodies, conventional data sources such as census data and standard audience metrics often fail to capture the full picture of audience engagement. Census data, while useful for broad demographics, is static, outdated, and rarely reflects lived experiences, motivations, or barriers faced by individuals and communities. Relying solely on these datasets risks misrepresenting audience needs, under-serving marginalised groups, and creating pressure to justify funding decisions based on incomplete or misleading evidence.

In particular, we have concerns about the dominant approach promoted by certain national organisations. For example, some rely on generic audience segmentation models and charge publicly funded cultural bodies for access to their services, despite themselves receiving public funding. In our opinion, this model is detrimental: it encourages a one-size-fits-all view of audiences, prioritises commercialised data over lived experience, and reinforces barriers for organisations working with underrepresented communities.

We have found that prioritising qualitative, community-driven insight is far more effective. Understanding audiences through conversations, co-creation, participatory evaluation, and direct engagement allows cultural organisations to design programmes that are meaningful, accessible, and relevant. From our experience, this approach strengthens relationships with communities and increases engagement without necessarily requiring larger budgets, because resources are targeted where they are most needed.

Benefits of moving away from census-driven approaches:

- Reduces pressure to justify funding purely through demographic “coverage” metrics.
- Encourages more equitable allocation of resources, focusing on need and engagement rather than assumptions.
- Builds long-term trust and stronger relationships with communities, increasing the likelihood of sustainable participation.
- Supports innovative and responsive programming that aligns with the lived realities of audiences.

In our view, this shift from static, data-heavy decision-making to dynamic, participatory engagement can help national and regional cultural bodies better understand and serve audiences while using funding more strategically and effectively.

THANK YOU

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