



Disconnected Bodies

SHAPING A FAIRER CULTURAL FUTURE

CONTRIBUTING TO THE ARTS
COUNCIL ENGLAND 2025 REVIEW

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.

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 also 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.

Another lesson from my experience is the importance of distinguishing 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

CONTRIBUTING TO THE 2025 ACE REVIEW

We welcomed the opportunity to contribute to the ACE 2025 review. We believed 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.

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

A recurring challenge we observe is the lack of meaningful presence from national cultural bodies in local and regional contexts. To many people, these institutions feel remote, abstract, and inaccessible. Without physical presence or tailored support, the barriers to engaging with funding processes remain high.

We believe more impact could be achieved by embedding roles directly within regions, establishing clear contact points, and contributing actively to local forums. This would enable decision-making that is more responsive to context and more connected to local cultural ecosystems. It would also signal a move away from being seen only as funders, towards being genuine partners in cultural development.

SHAPING CULTURE THROUGH PLACE

We believe a place-focused model is essential. This means investing in organisations and networks that are deeply rooted in their communities, who have the trust, insight, and relationships needed to build capacity and reach those excluded from traditional systems.

We have witnessed how local cultural hubs can generate investment, empower communities, and provide opportunities for talent to grow. Targeted support of this kind not only creates artistic outcomes but also advances wellbeing, skills, sustainability, and democratic participation.

VALUING EVERYDAY PARTICIPATION

We think it is vital to recognise the difference between professional cultural practice and wider community participation. These are both important but require different forms of support, evaluation, and strategy.

Community participation ensures that everyone can benefit from the wellbeing and connection culture brings, while professional practice supports excellence and artistic growth. We would like to see clearer recognition of these distinctions at a strategic level, so that both are resourced appropriately and valued in their own right.

LOCAL CONNECTIONS AND VISIBILITY

For cultural life to flourish, support must be distributed in ways that reflect people's lived realities. This requires evolution, not abandonment, of existing models ensuring fairness, local accountability, and balance across the regions.

We see five priorities as central to this:

- **Locally Shaped Strategies:** Collaborate with partners in each area to define cultural aims, with funding tied to regional outcomes.
- **Strengthening Community Anchors:** Invest in trusted local organisations not just as deliverers, but as convenors, connectors, and builders of local creative capacity.
- **Collaborative Practitioner Networks:** Support structures that encourage practitioners to share knowledge, collaborate, and build resilience across regions.
- **Evidence That Reflects Place:** Develop frameworks that show culture's impact on wellbeing, inclusion, and resilience in ways that balance local and national priorities.
- **Defining National Responsibilities:** Clarify how national bodies connect with government, local authorities, and cultural infrastructure to better support communities.

ENCOURAGING 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 determinantal: 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.



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