

**VISUAL
ARTS
SOUTH WEST**

Extraordinary Ambition

We want the South West to be a place where talented artists thrive; where extraordinary work is supported and success is enabled.

We are working towards a South West with a resilient and connected visual arts ecology that inspires more engaged and diverse audiences to value and advocate for its work.

Introduction

This ambition can only be realised through collaboration and partnership. We will continue our ongoing dialogue and consultation with the visual arts community which informs our analysis of the rapidly changing context within which we exist. We will work collegiately as a network to develop ways to support the needs that flow from this analysis. We aim to work in partnership with Arts Council England to share knowledge and resource and to develop robust strategies in order to achieve our shared goals.

This short document considers the context of the visual arts in the South West; the challenges and opportunities that it provides and proposes an initial framework for a regional visual arts strategy that will be further developed over the next six months through consultation and discussion with the wider sector.

Research & Consultation

Visual Arts South West maintains ongoing communication with individuals, organisations and agencies within the sector. We do this through several routes:

1. Steering Group

Our Steering Group is made up of elected representatives of Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs), independent artists and curators, Major Partner Museums (MPMs) and non-NPOs. The group reflects the geographic spread and diversity of practice within the region. Our quarterly meetings and working groups enable us to examine specific issues brought to the table by experienced and expert members of the ecology. The group is co-ordinated by the Regional Coordinator, Grace Davies, and is currently chaired by Helen Legg, Director of Spike Island.

2. Consultation Events

We facilitate an annual regional consultation event at which the visual arts community can discuss current challenges and issues that they face. The event enables idea sharing, knowledge exchange and collaboration. Several smaller events take place throughout the year, usually focussed around specific topics.

3. Regular communication with members of the ecology

The Regional Development Coordinator and Online Editor are in regular contact with a much wider constituency through face-to-face visits, telephone contact and email correspondence. Through this we gather intelligence and develop our understanding of the context in which we are operating.

4. Evaluation

Through the ongoing evaluation of our programme activity we build further knowledge of challenges faced by participants in our programmes and what steps best help them overcome them.

Context

Geography

The South West is the largest of the English regions geographically, with the longest coastline and a distinctive historical pattern of settlement and economic development. It is the premier tourism region in England. For its size the region has a relatively small number of urban conurbations and none with a population of more than 500,000. This is anomalous in relation to all other English regions and has implications for the urban 'critical mass' which has been historically important in the development of creative clusters.

With the recent addition of Hampshire to its footprint, the geography of the region remains a substantial challenge. For organisations and practitioners in Cornwall, the Arts Council England South West office is now at least 4 hours drive (one-way) and attendance at any regional convention requires a significant financial and time commitment. Many organizations and individuals report feelings of isolation and are insufficiently networked nationally and internationally.

With poor regional travel networks, (compounded by recent adverse conditions) and a dispersed population, ensuring connectivity and developing critical mass are key challenges.

Ecology

The South West covers the largest geographical area of any ACE region yet receives the lowest overall subsidy. Visual arts will receive the lowest (by over £2m) amount of national portfolio funding of any region between 2015-18. Within the last two years several key visual arts organisations have ceased trading and several more are under threat as investment is withdrawn. This has weakened both the infrastructure and the ecology, and sees the visual arts in the South West operating from the wrong side of a tipping point.

Unsuccessful Grants for the Arts applications have resulted in negative impacts to the ecology, such as artist-led initiatives (Cheltenham's Meantime space for example) being forced to close. Strategic changes to touring funds have also led to a reduction in these funds being used for visual arts projects, while other key funders to the visual arts such as the Henry Moore Foundation have seen their assets decline in recent years and are therefore making fewer and less sizable project grants.

Funding from local councils across the region is also in decline. Somerset County Council voted to cut all its direct grants to arts organisations in 2010 and other councils face cuts to their funding that similarly endanger the arts. Other changes to council subsidies have damaged the infrastructure; in Bristol changes to Business Rates Relief has meant that several promising new initiatives were unable to continue.

We are in no doubt that the conditions under which the ecology is operating are shifting. Income diversification is difficult for many visual arts organisations to achieve given the sector's commitment to free entry. A better

understanding of ways in which operating models might be updated is urgently required. We wish to work with ACE and our other funders and stakeholders to develop models that are sustainable in the long term.

That ACE has taken on responsibility for MPMs offers possibilities for increased integration and audience development. There are 3 consortiums of MPMs within the region as well as Tate St. Ives. The region also benefits from a number of high quality art schools and courses, including the University West of England, Bath Spa University, Falmouth School of Art and Plymouth College of Art.

Participation

The South West hosts a high number of visual arts practitioners, with the third highest number of commercial galleries in the UK*. (**The Guardian, 2013*) Participation and engagement is also the highest of all ACE regions (68% of adults engage 3 or more times in a year with the arts), and the figures for 'people who attended an art exhibition' are 2% higher than the average for England (statistics, ACE - *Taking Part Survey 2012*).

However, diversity across the South West is low. The South West is 90.52% White British (compared to 83.35% overall for England & Wales), and the 2011 Audiences South West data benchmark pilot indicated that Visual Arts Audiences were 97% White British. We need to do more to understand our existing and potential audiences and to attract a more diverse range of attendees.

Strategic Priorities

How Visual Arts South West can support the achievement of extraordinary ambition

1. Infrastructure

Building and sustaining a stronger and more resilient infrastructure

The current museum and gallery infrastructure is thin compared to other regions and under threat due to reduced resources. We must support continued improvement and resourcing of the physical gallery infrastructure, to develop spaces of national and international standing and the curatorial skill and allied production capacity within the South West. Improving the spaces we already have will enable the region to become more 'tour-ready', and will increase opportunities for audiences to see work of a national and international reputation.

Visual Arts organisations in the South West need support to develop achievable and sustainable business models. As county/ city council and Arts Council input reduces, so does our capacity to secure match funding. Understanding the challenges and constraints of visual arts business models is vital in finding new solutions. With a diverse range of business models spread across the region, it is imperative that this support is tailored and sustained.

Skills development to support effective operation, ambition and artistic vision for the infrastructure is of continuing importance. VASW's leadership programme and organisational development schemes have been popular and well-received, however it is acknowledged that 'up-skilling' whilst running a demanding organisation presents another set of challenges. Again, it is vital that we can facilitate peer networking, which has proven incredibly useful to professionals working in the arts, increasing connectivity and reducing isolation.

We need to explore new opportunities for marketplace development, learning from other regions and schemes that have already taken place.

We must understand, promote and develop the strengths of the region and its unique offer relative to other parts of the UK.

2. Talent

Creating the right conditions in the South West for talent to thrive

The success of the Visual Arts ecology depends on the vision and creativity of our artists and arts leaders and the value our audiences place on them. Artists need continuing support in training, mentoring, exposure to new work and in secure career pathways and structures which enable them to focus on their work. Our network of organisations already support some of this work, and our artist and curator development programmes have provided timely support opportunities for practitioners but we still need to develop ongoing mechanisms which can strengthen the careers of individual practitioners and find ways to provide targeted support for those who fall outside the existing routes. It is vital that talented artists in the South West are recognized through properly paid opportunities.

Education is a fundamental under-pinning for this. We intend to nurture good working relationships with HEI's as well as schools, and we will look to build new, sustainably-funded models in ensuring that talented individuals are receiving the right kinds of guidance and support.

Artist-led spaces and initiatives provide important stepping-stones between higher education and national and international exhibitions and are a vital part of a healthy ecology. They also provide peer support and critique, and opportunities for experimentation and testing. We need to ensure that ambitious artist-led initiatives are supported and championed.

Our curators and arts leaders similarly need to be supported and better networked. They should be encouraged to be ambitious, to develop national and international links for the region's benefit, to produce exhibitions, projects and institutions that are rank as some of the best in the world and to be active in their ongoing support of each other and the wider ecology.

Critical debate and dialogue is essential to enable practice to develop and thrive. Working towards increasing the quality and extent of the editorial coverage and critical debate around visual arts in the South West in a national and international context is an important component in retaining and nurturing talent in the region.

3. Engagement

Supporting the visual arts ecology to enrich lives and deepen knowledge, understanding and love of contemporary visual art while increasing and broadening impact.

Our recent study on 'Quality of Experience in the Visual Arts' highlighted the contemporary visual arts experience as one of active engagement rather than passive consumption; visitors can enter and leave when they wish,

choreograph their own journey through physical space and develop their own interpretation of the work. Their experience is enhanced when their engagement is deepened by discussing it with others or learning more about the artist or medium. The study suggested that work should not be dumbed down, but that providing information in clear, jargon-free text and other 'ways-in', such as family-friendly handouts, could enhance the experience. We need to work with organisations to support their capacity and ability to provide such interpretive tools in support of the visitor experience.

Developing work in public space can also provide an opportunity to engage more people with contemporary visual art. High quality commissioning, developed in partnership and collaboration with external stakeholders can help break down barriers to engagement and provide new opportunities for artists. This may prove to be especially significant in a region without a strong gallery infrastructure.

We recognize that the diversity of visual arts audiences in the south west should be developed. Audience data for the visual arts is patchy and we are working with Audiences Agency to develop our knowledge of our visitors and understand where we need to target our efforts to bridge gaps, build on relationships and develop new audiences. We are also developing strategies with South West Museum Development for shared initiatives.

We will build on existing gallery education and community outreach practice to ensure that as many people as possible are able to engage with the visual arts.

We will stimulate and support critical platforms, obtaining critical coverage and maintaining international presence for the contemporary visual arts. This needs to include nurturing writing talent as well as engaging with critics and writers from further afield and support for publication and critical writing.

4. Connectivity

Connecting the Visual Arts community locally, regionally, nationally and internationally

Extraordinary Ambition can only be achieved through collective knowledge and shared objectives. We need to create an environment in which each component part of the ecology supports itself through collegiate working, generosity of spirit and a willingness to engage beyond its own parameters.

Our website provides a crucial mechanism to connect people, resources, news events and opportunities. Driving and developing the site continues to remain a priority. We will look at how to support new digital practices, as a means of improving connectivity.

Continuing to provide opportunities for face to face exchange is also imperative, and examining the mechanism for this is important. Considering

sub-regional network meetings might be more realistic for a stretched, time poor community. Consulting on issues such as this is important to ensure we remain relevant.

We will remain part of the Contemporary Visual Arts Network (CVAN), and work to develop cross-regional knowledge networks to continue the development of expertise. We will advocate with our national colleagues for the contemporary visual arts.

We will support touring into the region, building relationships with key partners such as Art Council Touring Exhibitions in order to ensure that audiences have access to high quality work being seen in other parts of the UK.

We are committed to developing channels of communication with neighbouring artforms, other creative industry communities and external partners.

There is ambition improve our international networks and we will work with the British Council to find opportunities for members of the community to work outside the UK.

Conclusion

Summary of aims

PRIORITY	FOCUS
Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Value and strengthen the gallery infrastructure as entry points for audiences Develop links with MPMs Support peer to peer networks Support the sharing of new and evolving business models Support skills development in sustainable organizational practice Support marketplace research & development
Talent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Visual arts education Continuous professional development for artists The artist-led sector as a vital part of the ecology Recognise the value of critical debate
Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore new models of delivery in public spaces to engage new audiences in this rural, dispersed region. Utilising the Quality of Experience study, find new 'ways-in' for higher quality audience

	<p>engagement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge excellence in arts education and build on this • Support audience data gathering to grow diverse audiences for visual arts • Raise the critical profile of work made and presented across the region
Connectivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support the breadth & depth of the ecology through providing opportunities for knowledge exchange • Build on the success of the VASW website • Increase opportunities for face to face discussion • Share learning across the country through the CVAN network • We will supplement physical interaction and communication with strengthening digital practice in the region • Support exchange across disciplines and sectors • Support touring into the region