

PUTTING CHILDREN FIRST



National well-being, children and the arts

The issues raised in this paper will be discussed at an Action for Children's Arts conference to be held at the Unicorn Theatre, London, on 19 June 2012.

'The true measure of a nation's standing is how well it attends to its children.'
UNICEF

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1 INTRODUCTION

Against a background of growing concern about children's well-being in the UK, negative perceptions of children and a feeling that childhood itself is undervalued, perhaps we should not be surprised that little more than 1% of public funding for the arts is directed towards work for which children are the main audience.

Children up to twelve years old make up around 15% of the population. The arts have a special place in their lives. Through reading, singing and dancing, watching plays and films, seeing their lives reflected in paintings and sculptures, children's imaginations are stimulated and they learn to be creative. The attitudes, values and skills that we learn in childhood stay with us for the rest of our lives.

Since the publication of *The Arts in Schools* by the Gulbenkian Foundation in 1982, the arts world has generally perceived its relationship to children in the context of education. Successive governments have funded programmes such as *Creative Partnerships* to promote links between the arts and education sectors. Other reports, *All Our Futures* in 1999 and, more recently, the *Henley Review of Cultural Education*, have argued for the central place of the arts in children's learning.

Most arts organisations today have strong education departments running programmes of high quality. The irony is that, in many cases, they spend more on these programmes than they do on producing or presenting original work for children to see and enjoy. It is still the case that most theatres do one family show a year – at Christmas – and that most cultural organisations plan their programmes primarily to meet the perceived needs and interests of an adult audience.

The aim of our conference is to explore the place that the arts have in children's lives, not just at school, but at home and in their local communities. In particular, we want to ask whether cultural organisations, with the support of national funding bodies and other agencies, could and should do more to promote the well-being of children through the creation, production, performance, exhibition and broadcast of work made specifically for them.

This paper provides a context for the conference, based on research that we and others have undertaken, and offers some practical suggestions for debate.

2 CHILDHOOD IN THE UK

Concern about attitudes to childhood in the UK has been growing for a number of years. In 2007, a UNICEF report on children's well-being in 21 industrialised nations put Britain in last place.

Two years later, the Children's Society published the results of its 'Good Childhood Inquiry' in a report entitled 'A Good Childhood: Searching for values in a competitive age'.

One of the contributors to the report, Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, said that society had become 'tone-deaf to the real requirements of children ... in a climate where the mixture of sentimentalism and panic makes discussion of children's issues so difficult'.

In June 2011, the Mothers' Union published a report into the commercialisation of childhood, arguing that 'children should be valued as children and not targeted as adult consumers'.

This report was used to launch a campaign called *Bye Buy Childhood* which aimed 'to empower families to challenge the commercialisation and sexualisation of childhood through positive action'.

UNICEF followed up its 2007 report with another in 2011 comparing childhood well-being in Britain, Spain and Sweden. This report, based on research carried out by *Ipsos Mori*, highlighted the negative impact of commercial pressures on children's lives, which was seen to be significantly greater in Britain than in the other countries.

All these reports focused on children's lives at home and in the local community.

The aggressive pursuit of personal success by adults is now the greatest threat to British children, a major independent report on childhood says. It calls for a sea-change in social attitudes and policies to counter the damage done to children by society.

BBC, 2 February 2009

Childhood has become a marketing opportunity worth £99 billion in the UK and £350 million is spent in the UK each year on persuading children to consume. Manipulative techniques exploit children's natural credulity and use them as a conduit to the household purse.

MOTHERS' UNION, June 2011

David Cameron has given strong backing to proposals to shield children from sexualised imagery across the media and tackle the commercialisation of childhood, but insisted that the way to bring about change is through "social responsibility, not state control."

THE GUARDIAN, June 2011

In the comparison of children's and families' experiences in the UK, Spain and Sweden, we found that a materialistic and commercial culture is embedded in the UK and in concepts of good parenting in a way that is not seen in Spain and Sweden.

UNICEF UK and IPSOS MORI, September 2011

3 CHILDREN'S ARTS IN THE UK

In September 2011, Action for Children's Arts made Freedom of Information¹ requests to UK arts organisations and national funding bodies in order to establish as precisely as possible the level of public funding for children's arts, relative to the rest of the population.

We asked Arts Council England, the Arts Council of Wales, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Creative Scotland and the British Film Institute:

What amount, in cash terms and as a proportion of the total of all grants, was given in 2009-10 and 2004-5 to support work aimed at children up to 12 years of age?

We asked 20 arts organisations, each of which has a national profile, to tell us:

What amount, in cash terms and as a proportion of total expenditure, did you spend in 2009-10 and 2004-5 on productions, performances, exhibitions or broadcasts aimed wholly or mainly at children up to 12 years of age?

Our intention in asking this question was, by excluding expenditure on education and outreach activity, to focus on the organisation's attitude to children as an audience segment in their own right.

The organisations to which we sent requests, chosen from across the arts and across the UK, were:

BBC, BBC National Orchestra of Wales, Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery, Birmingham Royal Ballet, Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, English National Ballet, National Gallery, National Theatre, National Theatre Scotland, National Theatre Wales, Opera North, Philharmonia Orchestra, Royal Opera House, Royal Scottish National Orchestra, Royal Shakespeare Company, Scottish Ballet, Scottish Opera, Tate Gallery and Welsh National Opera.

The result is a snapshot, but one that has a clear focus and is based on a representative sample of the country's flagship cultural organisations.

A summary of the responses we received is given on the following pages.

¹ Only certain national bodies, including the Arts Councils, BFI and BBC, are legally required to comply with the Freedom of Information Act, but all publicly funded bodies are expected to do so.

What amount, in cash terms and as a proportion of the total of all grants, was given in 2009-10 and 2004-5 to support work aimed at children up to 12 years of age?

Arts Council England did not give a precise answer to our question but referred to their current strategic framework which includes as one of its five goals, 'for every child and young person (aged 0-19) to have the opportunity to experience the richness of the arts', giving examples of programmes that support links between the arts and education sectors and encourage participation in the arts. They told us that in the next three years 64% of the organisations funded as part of the National portfolio would be supporting their goal for children and young people. They said that they 'do not monitor exactly what proportion of their funding is related to the delivery of this goal, but each organisation will have an activity plan with specific work identified with children and young people and will be expected to report on that work on a yearly basis.'

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland explained that 'while the Arts Council holds information with regard to awards for the youth arts sector as a whole, no figures are available for those projects aimed specifically at the under twelve age group.'

The Arts Council of Wales told us that grants totalling £419,974 (1.25%) in 2009-10 and £625,651 (1.9%) in 2004-5 helped to fund projects where children and young people up to the age of 16 were identified as the main beneficiaries or participants. They also referred to their *Young Creators* strategy and to their regular monitoring of attendance and participation rates among children and young people through an independently managed annual survey.

Creative Scotland stated that they 'do not track in detail expenditure specific to your request and therefore it would be too costly to justify researching this for an FOI request.' They went on to say that children and young people were a key priority and mentioned Starcatchers, Puppet Animation Scotland, Wee Stories, Catherine Wheels and Imagine, among others, as examples of projects they support.

The British Film Institute was unable to identify films made specifically for children up to 12 years of age, only those classified by the British Board of Film Censors as either U, PG or 12A. On that basis, the figures were £5.9m (46%) in 2009-10 and £5.3m (42%) in 2004-5.

What amount, in cash terms and as a proportion of total expenditure, did you spend in 2009-10 and 2004-5 on productions, performances, exhibitions or broadcasts aimed wholly or mainly at children up to 12 years of age?

Based on the responses we received from 18 of the 20 organisations to whom we sent FOI requests, average expenditure on programming work aimed at children (excluding education and outreach programmes) as a proportion of the total annual budget for the years in question was as follows:

	2009-10	2004-5
Theatre companies	2.5%	1.2%
Galleries and museums	1.1%	0.9%
Opera companies	0.8%	0.8%
Ballet companies	4.6%	1.7%
Orchestras	1.5%	0.5%
BBC	3.2%	5.4%
All	2.2%	1.7%

In most cases, arts organisations spend significantly more on participatory projects run by their education departments than they do on programming work that is made specifically for children. The Tate, for example, told us that its ‘exhibition programme is aimed at all age groups, not at specific age groups’ and went on to say ‘that there is a huge range of activity aimed at this age group alongside both the temporary exhibition programme and the Collection display at all four sites’.

The National Gallery told us that it did not mount any exhibitions aimed specifically at under-12s but that it did ‘run a range of programmes for this age group, as well as mounting the *Take One Picture* exhibition, which each year showcases the work produced by children in our primary schools programme.’ Expenditure on these programmes in 2009-10 amounted to 1.7% of total operating expenditure and in 2004-5 to 1.3%.

Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery presented in each year two exhibitions aimed wholly or mainly at children up to 12 years of age.’ Expenditure on these exhibitions represented 1.7% and 1.3% respectively of Birmingham Museum Service’s total operating costs at all its sites.

Scottish Opera told us that its Education Department ‘has been established for over

40 years and remains the longest established of any European Opera Company.’ In 2009-10, education projects for children up to 12 years old accounted for 5% of the company’s total budget. The comparable figure for 2004-5 was 2%.

The Royal Opera House and Opera North both gave examples of productions aimed at children, as well as schools matinees and education programmes. In both cases, expenditure on participatory activities was higher than expenditure on productions, the latter being around 1% of each company’s total expenditure.

National Theatre Wales told us that, as the company was only formed in 2008 and did not undertake its first production until March 2010, ‘no expenditure was incurred on production aimed at children. However, the company is looking to develop children’s work for future production.’ Expenditure by National Theatre Scotland in the same year was above the average for the four national companies. Expenditure by the Royal Shakespeare Company was a little below. Productions at the National Theatre in 2009-10 included *War Horse* and *Cat in a Hat*, although only the latter could be said to be aimed wholly or mainly at children up to 12 years old, making its total expenditure on productions for this age group relatively low.

Birmingham Royal Ballet replied that ‘while we do not produce any work aimed wholly or mainly at children up to 12 years of age, we estimate that at least 50% of our performances per annum are suitable for audiences of any age and we encourage attendance by schools and families by offering a range of discounts and packages to ensure that price does not prohibit access.’

Scottish Ballet explained that although ‘the winter season production is always aimed at families and is created with children and young people in mind... it is really only *The Nutcracker* that has been created specifically for children.’

English National Ballet had a significantly higher expenditure on productions aimed at children in 2009-10 than in 2004-5, representing 9% of total expenditure, and stated that ‘in addition we consider all of our productions as widely accessible to this age group, including such ballets as *The Nutcracker* and *Cinderella*. We actively encourage families and schools to attend offering reduced price tickets to matinee performances and linked learning activities.’

Responses from orchestras generally focused on the work of their education teams, with estimates of expenditure on education programmes for children up to twelve years old ranging from 1% to 2.7%.

The BBC did not answer our question directly but referred us instead to the information provided in its annual reports for the years in question. It is the only organisation in our survey whose expenditure on children appears to be in decline.

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CONCLUSIONS

The responses to our Freedom of Information requests raise a number of important questions. For example...

- Is it fair that children up to the age of twelve, who make up 15% of the population, should benefit from a much smaller proportion of the public funding available for the arts as a whole?
- Do children suffer from being included in policies for 'children and young people' that do not differentiate between those two age groups?
- Should the national arts funding bodies do more to support and encourage the creation of work aimed at children as audiences?
- Is there a case for saying that children are in practice more dependent on public subsidy for access to the arts than anyone else and should therefore receive a larger share of the funding available?
- Should it be part of the remit of the country's flagship arts organisations to promote and produce original work for children?

The contribution that the learning departments of most arts organisations make to children's understanding and enjoyment of the arts through participatory activities is vital. So are links between arts organisations and schools. Cultural organisations of all kinds have worked hard to make children and families feel welcome when they come into their buildings. But it is still too often the case that the aim is to make work for adults accessible to children, rather than the other way round. The adult audience almost always comes first.

In a recent *Thought for the Day* on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme, Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi, said this: 'If you want to survive and thrive as a people, a culture, a civilization, celebrate the family. Hold it sacred. Eat together. Tell the story of what most matters to you across the generations. Make children the most important people. Put them centre stage.'

UNICEF, in its 2007 report, *Child well-being in rich countries* (the one that put Britain bottom of the league), suggested that 'the true measure of a nation's standing is how well it attends to its children'.

What would happen if, in planning their programmes for next year, the nation's cultural organisations **put children first**?

To show what this would mean in practice, we offer the following proposals for discussion.

5 PROPOSALS

1. Children up to 12 years old make up 15% of the population. Their share of the available public funding for the arts is rarely more than 1%. So...

Putting children first means adopting 15% as a benchmark for their fair share of public funding for the arts.

2. Arts funding bodies, despite making children a priority, either spend very little or are unable to say how much they spend on children's arts or what difference their funding makes. So...

Putting children first means deciding how much public funding to allocate to children's arts and measuring its impact.

3. Free admission to museums and galleries has benefited children and families more perhaps than any other population group. Cost remains a major obstacle to children's access to the performing arts. So...

Putting children first means finding ways of making theatre, music and dance affordable for families and schools.

4. The BBC spends less than it did five years ago on children's programmes. Less than 1% of that diminishing budget is spent on original programmes made in the UK. So...

Putting children first means making children's television distinctive, original and unique to the UK.

5. Productions and exhibitions aimed at children make up a very small proportion of the programmes of most national and regional arts organisations. So...

Putting children first means making work for children integral to the mainstream programmes of flagship arts organisations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We wish to thank all the organisations who responded to our Freedom of Information requests and hope they feel that we have made fair and appropriate use of the information they provided.

This initiative was proposed at a meeting between Action for Children's Arts and other children's arts organisations to explore ways in which we could act together to achieve shared objectives. The organisations represented were Ambassador Theatre Group, Bookstart, Children's Film & Television Foundation/Save Kids TV, Cultural Learning Alliance, Earlyarts, engage, Rose Bruford College, Smallsite, The Prince's Foundation for Children & the Arts, Theatre for Young Audiences and Wish Films.

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