University of Southampton

THE AFFECTS OF FUNDING IN THE ARTS

Introduction

This report introduces and summarises *The Affects of Funding in the Arts* – a project led by Professor Dan Ashton at Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton (UK) between 2017-2018. The project explored funding for arts and culture in the UK by focusing on funding application processes and the arts professionals who engage with them. This involved asking - who applies for funding, why and how?

Some context

A context section for a report relating to funding for arts and culture in the UK needs to be **immediate** and timely as it connects with **current circumstances**. This report from 2025 however relates to research undertaken in 2017-18, so instead provides a much briefer contextual overview which highlights a disconcertingly **familiar** situation and some continuities **with long-standing challenges.**

In developing this project in 2016, contextual reference points include **austerity** and **Brexit**. In developing the insights into an article for ***Arts Professional*** in 2022, contextual reference points included **Covid-19 pandemic** and the **cost-of-living crisis**. In developing this report in 2025, contextual reference points include all the above and more, including the implications of the 2025 **spending review**.

Given this balance between the current and the longstanding, this report does not offer an extended context. Rather, a sense of this familiarity and repetition can quickly established in bringing together analysis from 2016 (e.g., New Local's ***Funding Arts and Culture in a Time of Austerity***) and from 2024-25 (e.g., Artquest's ***Restore the Arts***; Contemporary Visual Arts Network's ***Framing the Future***; Local Government Association's ***Cultural funding: challenges and opportunities***; Art Council England's ***Private Investment in Culture Survey***). The point here is that the issues and discussion points from around ten years ago remain.

It is this situation of continuity and long-standing challenges which motivates the pulling together of the findings from this project into a report 8 years later.

The project

The project took place between February 2017 and August 2018 and overlapped with the application and decision stages for the Arts Council England (ACE) National Portfolio Organisations (NPO) 2018–2022 funding round. This project was funded through the Winchester School of Art (University of Southampton) Strategic Research Fund.

The project involved research visits to eleven arts and cultural organisations across literature, music, theatre, visual arts and combined arts. Using NPO status as a focus point, participants included: (1) currently funded; (2) first-time funded (3) unsuccessful applicants; (4) those that had not applied. Organisations were a range of sizes and participants include a mixture of creative director, chief executive and specialist fundraising and development managers.

For each organisation, a **research visit** was conducted consisting of a **career biography interview** (addressing career background, current role, organisational context, wider sector and policy contexts, and arts and cultural funding experiences and practices) and **an object interview** using a range of funding application forms/proposals as discussion prompts. More details on the project's research design and methodology are included in the open access article, 'Funding Arts and Culture' in ***European Journal of Cultural Studies***.

Why affects?

The title, *The Affects of Funding in the Arts*, is a play on the words "affect" and "effect".

Effects with an 'e' refers to what happens when an organisation does or does not receive funding. For example, the possibilities for the projects an organisation can develop, and the people it can work with.

Affects with an "a" directs attention to the affective, or emotional, aspects. To explore the passionate investments and challenging conditions associated with working in arts and cultural sectors, the concept of "affect" was used. This term helps to describe 'moments of resentment, kindness, grumpiness, ennui and feeling good' (**Margaret Wetherall**, 2012). For example:

- → ***despair*** in navigating funding processes (see *Arts Professional* accounts of Grantium as a "nightmare" in **2017** and "hideous" in **2025**)
- → ***satisfaction*** of submitting an application bid
- → ***elation*** of securing funding
- → ***uncertainty*** of meeting funding targets
- → ***concern*** with what happens for artists, audiences, and participants if funding cannot be secured.

The following sets out ten findings from the project that emerged from the research visits and were explored at a knowledge exchange event with participants and other interested parties (academics, policymakers, and arts and cultural sector freelancers and organisations).

Findings

1. Breadth … and depth?

Findings brought together under breadth and depth speak to the range of roles involved in working in an arts and cultural organisation.

A frequently shared challenge was around **resources and capacity**. For example, where those responsible for creative or strategic direction would also be bogged down with estates issues. For two participants, it was literally being bogged down as they described the necessary demands of building and estates issues, including fixing the toilets.

For other participants, it was how development roles and a focus on funding would exist across **several different types of funding**, including: trusts and foundations; donations; charitable giving. Whilst some larger arts and cultural organisations would have development managers dedicated to different income streams, it was generally the case of one or two people covering multiple areas. **A future direction and priority here was for new appointments to an organisation to offer new areas of experience in addition to those already within an organisation.**

When it came to **training and experience**, the process of **completing funding applications** was explored. There were varying degrees of experience – both in the type and number of applications. There was also sustained discussion of the learning and training required to engage with different types of forms – from writing a compelling 100-word summary to navigating application forms.

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the financial pressures on arts and cultural organisations, **staff would take on multiple roles and work across areas**. Whilst there are points to address around sustainability of workloads and access to necessary training and support, this approach is rooted in clear aims. Firstly, there was a strong recognition of the need for working together and understanding different aspects and departments within an organisation – particularly when it came to the working relationship between development and marketing and communications. Secondly, this approach aligns with the idea that "everyone is a fundraiser".

2. Everyone one is a fundraiser

The idea of everyone being a fundraiser does not translate into everyone being involved in fundraising activity in a day-to-day way, but rather that there is strong **understanding and appreciation across the organisation of fundraising priorities and approaches.**

One participant phrased this as "everybody advocating for the whole organisation" and gave examples where members of the organisation working on different projects were familiar with the overall organisational ethos and fundraising strategy. A further example of this saw artists joining with development managers on funding pitches to potential corporate givers.

3. The charity mindset

Being a charity was another area in which a strategic shift in mindset was described. This was mainly concerned with **clearly communicating the charitable status** of organisation. Whilst physical collection boxes and online donation options would operate to encourage donations, the larger goal is to very clearly position the organisation alongside charitable organisations and in contrast to organisations that are for-profit.

In reflecting on this charitable positioning, there was a firm recognition on being up against "heart strings in an increasingly competitive field". Charitable donations were widely regarded as an income growth area (often because it is currently the lowest). However, this could entail potential givers having to weigh-up charitable giving between artistic and cultural activities and a range of other charitable concerns, for example social and medical.

4. Collaborative in a competitive context

Public funding available through ACE was a substantial discussion point, especially given the timing of the research visits. One participant recalled a fundraising event in which an ACE relationship manager highlighted how ACE receive more applications than can be funded. In recognising and adapting to this situation, the corresponding approach was to ensure **well-aligned responses to the set criteria** and submitting the strongest possible applications.

Going beyond specific solutions, there were also questions around experiences of having to compete in applying for limited funding. The implications of this have been explored through the idea of 'organisational portfolio precarity' in ***Arts Professional*** and the open access article, 'Funding Arts and Culture' in ***European Journal of Cultural Studies***. An alternative approach emerged which directed energy **away from the necessity of competition and more towards collaboration**. This entailed organisations looking for ways for to develop projects together and developing mentoring relationships.

5. The funding egg and the chicken project. Or, the project egg and the chicken funding.

This was dedicated discussion with several viewpoints on **developing a project and then seeking funding for it or identifying a call for funding and developing a project in response.**

There were examples where a project was developed in response to an opportunity. On occasion this would be entirely bespoke. This was regarded, however, as taking on a lot of work and creating risks of deviating from or detracting from an organisation's agreed programme of activities. Other times, this would be meaningfully adapting an existing project. In turn, this risked not aligning to funding criteria carefully enough and could be received as a comprise.

The overall suggestion was to develop activities as set out in planning and in being true to the established organisational vision and strategy. When opportunities that align emerge, any response could therefore be more authentic.

6. Earned income, membership, donations and longer-term relations

There were some notable differences across the research visits on earned income. **Corporate hire** was an obvious way forward for organisations with **venues**. For organisations without venues, **professional development programmes and training workshops** were explored.

For those with venues and/or event ticketing, **relationships with audiences** were a significant area of discussion. There were different versions of memberships and patrons scheme operating across organisations and these were also established to different degrees. **Memberships** were largely understood as being for the benefit of the individual (e.g. low cost to promote access) rather than a significant income stream. This was though an area with firm plans around building up **a large number of small amount donators** with the goal that the size of these donations would grow over time.

Memberships were also positioned to **build relationships with audiences** (and potentially their networks) in ways that might lead to more significant giving. There were lots of interesting examples of what building relationships could look like, including: attending events together; remembering drinks orders; and sending recordings of events for those unable to attend. The demands and implications of this have been explored elsewhere through the concept of **emotional labour**.

7. Values-led funding relationships

There was a firm sense that corporate donations and sponsorship are increasingly competitive. Corporate social responsibility may have been a motivation in the past, but project participants noted how **'corporates' were now more mindful of getting something in return**. This might be part of earned income angle, (e.g. staff training) or development (e.g., staff training or development days; marketing and public visibility).

From the perspective of participants, these **relationships had to be values-led**. When establishing relationships and approaching potential sponsors, there was not a strict or fixed position around values and ethics – although similar kinds of examples were given where organisations would be reluctant to link, for example oil companies and tobacco. Rather than a definite list of ethical behaviours, the focus was more on **how the values of organisations align.**

8. The other side of the table

The idea of **experience from the other side of the funding table** was raised by participants. This was specific to funding from public bodies, trusts and foundations, and corporate rather than charitable donations – although personal experience to understand the motivations of someone giving £5 or £50 was also noted.

This theme of understanding funding from "the other side" was explored by participants who had been involved in the allocation of arts funding - as local authority officers, in roles with ACE, and in roles at corporate organisations which donate to arts and cultural sectors. These experiences were described as hugely helpful for understanding what funders are looking for and what makes a compelling application.

Another dimension was **reaching out to those on the other side of the table**. The main way this was described was through picking up the phone. For example, a phone call to a trust or foundation might be to clarify something in the criteria. It would also be opportunity to gleam extra insights. This could include timings on when to apply and overlaps with other applications. Where these conversations had taken place and time had been invested by both parties in developing a proposal, the overall view was that some kind of funding would follow. This does though then **raise issues around equality of access and the support and training required to support someone with this approach.**

9. Evaluation – stories and statistics

Alongside the funding application process, the interviews explored **the reporting and evaluation** of funded projects. The reporting required could differ significantly depending on the type of funder. There was also a discussion about the type of reporting and evaluation. As one interviewee put it, "we're so good at the anecdotal."

Across the research visits there were examples of how stories, quotes and images were collected and how these could be used as part of the evaluation and reporting. The emerging issue was blending these stories with other types of data. This was often in recognition of the kind of data and material that government would look for. It didn't necessarily mean data, for example on numbers of participants, should take priority. Indeed, some participants expressed the importance of not prioritising numerical indicators such as attendance, to thinking more about the **impact for participants**. The key point was **precision** – even if the numbers were low, being able to specifically identify numbers and articulate the impact was important.

10. Long-term commitments

A further step or challenge related to evaluation was creating a **longitudinal understanding**. This closely connected to the idea of long-term relationships and commitments to those engaged with in projects, activities, events, and so on. The utmost care was expressed for those members of the public who participated in specific projects and those who participated in education or community programmes. This meant setting clear expectations in any conversations, co-designing and consultations prior to funding, and in trying to **ensure financial sustainability once projects had come to an end**. The implications of this have been explored elsewhere through the concept of **emotional labour**. In terms of evaluating projects and developing future projects, a longer-term understanding was seen as important but hindered by resourcing challenges.

Conversations and Exchanges

The findings and analysis covered in this report have been shared and explored in different settings and formats.

- → **Knowledge exchange event video** (July 2017): findings and reflections are presented in this seven-minute video.
- → **Journal article** for ***Poetics*** (2021): explores the challenges of funding and income diversification and the emotional labour involved with sponsor and audience relationships.
- → **Open access journal article** for ***European Journal of Cultural Studies*** (2022:) introduces the concept of organisational portfolio precarity to critically understand the everyday situations and implications of how art and cultural organisations respond to income diversification priorities.
- → **Feature** for ***Arts Professional*** (2022): explores the everyday experiences of arts and cultural organisations in generating and diversifying income in times of austerity.
- → **Text-based artwork Forms of culture** exhibited as part of the *Ordinary Things* exhibition at Winchester Gallery (2023): comprises two participatory pieces ("Mix" and "Move"), which invite the reordering of questions and guidance that were previously fixed in place within arts funding application forms.

Alongside the direct links above, the materials can be accessed via the University of Southampton **project webpage**.

Continued thanks and appreciation to all those that participated in this research project and those participants and others who further developed the findings and insights through the **knowledge exchange workshop.**

Images by photographer Jacob Elder.

This report should be cited as:

Ashton, D. (2025) The Affects of Funding in the Arts. University of Southampton. DOI: **10.5258/SOTON/P1225**