

Arts Council England and Public Value: A Critical Review

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Introduction

Arts Council England (ACE), the quango with major responsibility for funding the arts in England¹, has recently completed a major research project (at a cost of some £250,000 (approximately \$510,000 or 360,000 Euros)) that has been intended to identify the future direction that it should take with regard to its' responsibilities and functions. This research has been guided by recent developments within the public sector management literature which sees the role of public sector organisations in managing the development, and maintenance, of ideas of 'public value' as key to the reinvigoration of the public sector. Given that this underlying theme is central to the entire research programme that the ACE has undertaken it is worth examining the extent to which it can actually provide a meaningful basis upon which arts supporting organisations can effectively function. A second concern is with whether the research underlying the attempt to identify 'public value' has been carried out in such a fashion that it provides an effective basis for the development of new management and policy ideas for the arts funding sector. In both cases these questions have much wider ramifications than for simply the English (or even the British) case as they concern the underlying political principles upon which arts funding organisations operate, and how these organisations fit in with the wider body politic.

Background

Arts Council England (ACE) launched a major research project in May 2006 that was intended to identify the 'public value' that existed in their operations, and to use this as the basis for identifying how the management of their activities could be improved in the future (Bunting, 2006a; 2006b; 2006c).

The research that was undertaken for this purpose differed from run-of-the-mill audience research in that it involved a much greater use of detailed qualitative (as opposed to crude quantitative questionnaire) data than is normally the case. It also provided the possibility for on-line participation through the provision of a number of discussion forums (some based around questions generated from the first stage of the research, and some more open ones responding to contributions from external sources²). In total there were nearly 1700 contributions to the research project through involvement in ‘workshops’, ‘in-depth interviews’, ‘discussion groups’, ‘deliberation’ and ‘open space’ meetings and web discussions alongside the on-line opportunities that were available (Bunting, 2007, pp. 4-5). The result of this is that there has been generated a mass of information about the questions and issues that were discussed during the process of undertaking the research (this can be found at www.artscouncil.org.uk/artsdebate/research.php) and this is likely to form the basis for a great deal of future work concerning attitudes towards the arts in England (much of it being summarised in Keaney *et al*, 2007). Indeed, the entire project has raised a large number of questions about what the ACE is doing and how it could potentially be amended and, as such, has a great deal of ‘value’ in its’ own right.

Questions, however, need to be asked about a number of issues associated with this research. Despite the amount of effort, and money, that has gone into it there are some severe methodological and analytical drawbacks to it that raise questions about the extent to which it can effectively serve as an adequate – or even appropriate – basis for the generation of new approaches to managing and funding the arts, not only in England but elsewhere around the rest of the world as well.

'Best Value': New Approach or Red Herring

The underlying assumptions behind the ACE's research can be found in the new 'public value' literature (Moore, 1995; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000; Coles & Parston, 2006; Blaug *et al*, 2006). As such this approach needs to be investigated in terms of what it is, how it differs from previous approaches to public sector management, and whether it is appropriate for the arts funding sector.

Identifying precisely what 'public value' is is something of an open question. The literature implies that it is at least one of: an approach to management; an end-product of the management process; a set of processes that organisations could/should/ought to pursue. The general idea appears to be that the delivery of public services should be focused at the improvement of both general processes within government so that the delivery of goods and services is improved (ie. the public will benefit and achieve improved 'value' from improvements in how public sector organisations operate), and at developing a better linkage between public sector organisations and the general public so that there is a better match of expectations between the two. This latter could be taken to be concerned with questions of public legitimacy, or with questions of service benefit. In the case of the former this could be through a concern with how the public can develop a better relationship with the organisations that serve them, either through understanding them better, or through exercising more direct control over them and their activities. In the case of the latter it could be through improving the organisation's ability to deliver goods and services to the public, or through more direct public involvement in this delivery through the identification of service needs.

At this level 'public value' would appear to be another management case of everything and nothing. It is such a broad range of ideas, processes and organisational factors that it is difficult to discern what the phrase actually means. Much of the literature is concerned with vague generalisations about how 'public value' can be created and what it actually consists of. Coles and Parston (2006), for example, talk about the cost effective provision of high quality services; the achievement of desirable outcomes; the generation of high levels of trust between citizens and governments; and the ability to achieve key social outcomes cost-effectively. None of this, however, actually identifies where 'public value' actually resides: is it in provision, outcomes, trust, or cost-effectiveness? Is it in all of these or divided up between them in some fashion? It might appear that 'public value' is the latest buzz-phrase that can be pedalled as the most modern version of public sector management snake-oil. A more simple version of the term, however, would be that it is simply concerned with identifying what 'value' (however the term is understood) is attached to certain areas of public policy by the public itself. This formed an important element of the ACE research and generated a great deal of material for consideration (see Cragg, Ross Dawson, 2007; Bunting, 2007)

The proponents of the 'public value' approach would certainly disagree with the negative view of it as simply rhetoric (or, less kindly, jargon). Blaug *et al* (2006), for example, see public value as a function of 'public service theory' that attempts to re-draw the relationship between hierarchical versions of bureaucracy and the democratic involvement of citizens. This 'theory'³ effectively privileges managers over politicians in an even stronger fashion than that of the previous versions of public sector management which gave rise to the 'new public management' of the

1980s and 1990s with its mantra of ‘letting managers manage’ (see Flynn, 2007; Hughes, 2003). ‘Public Service theory’ effectively argues that managers, rather than politicians, are the actors who can most effectively bridge the gap between public sector organisations and the general public. This technocratic version of management denies politicians any meaningful place in the identification of goals (these being generated by the general public *per se* and translated into action by heroic managers whose only concern is with the wishes of the public). Such a de-politicised version of public sector management was a continual theme throughout the ACE’s research discussions (one of the on-line discussion questions explicitly asked ‘should members of the public be involved in arts funding decisions’, for example, with continuous complaints being expressed about overt political ‘interference’ in arts funding decisions: see the summary in Kearney *et al*, 2007).

At one level this concern with the involvement of the public in the construction of public policy is something of a re-invention of already existing wheels. What is ‘new’ about it is that, in the American versions of the argument at least, it appears to be a conflation of concerns about a decline in citizen involvement in politics (argued to be a consequence of a loss of ‘social capital’ and trust in government: see Putnam, 2000), and public choice arguments about the inefficiency of governments in meeting public needs (Hindmoor, 2006). When these are combined with traditional American concerns with democracy and the nature of democratic government (with these going back to *The Federalist Papers* and de Tocqueville) there is a potent anti-politician mixture being generated (see Stoker, 2006, especially chs. 2-4) that leaves room for the disinterested bureaucrat to assume political centre-stage. (Even if this is expressed as being a matter of apolitical technical and administrative competence it is

inescapably political as a consequence of being concerned with values, legitimacy and resource allocation).

In the case of arts funding in Britain the argument is based upon slightly different grounds. The use of the quango form and the attempt to insulate the decisions of bodies like the ACE from the potentially venal interests of elected politicians has a long history (Gray, 2000; Doustaly, 2007) and has always served to insulate the organisation from overt political control (even if there appears to be a strong belief amongst respondents to the on-line discussion forums that central government does control everything that the ACE does in a ‘hands-on’ rather than an ‘arm’s-length’ fashion). The idea that the ACE should take a lead in the management of the arts funding sector in a non-party political fashion is not, therefore, saying anything new at all. If anything it is simply a re-statement of the formal constitutional (and practical political) position of the ACE. Justifying this position, as the best value research does, through the use of normative principles and assumptions provides a basis for re-enforcing the depoliticised basis of arts funding in Britain. It, however, neglects the fact that this basis is the result of political decisions in the first place.

This point - that the research is simply re-stating old arguments – even if with potentially new justifications for them – raises further concerns with the ‘public value’/public service ‘theory’ argument. The normative basis upon which it is based can lead to as unfruitful a set of arguments as those which are generated when asking ‘what is art?’ or even ‘what good are the arts?’ (Carey, 2006) in so far as they are not susceptible to any form of effective empirical evaluation or capable of argumentative resolution as a consequence of dealing with essentially contested concepts (Gray,

forthcoming). The consequence of this abstraction is that there can be a tendency to remove the argument from any particular concern with existing patterns of structure and behaviour and to prefer a Platonic search for the ideal in the context of a Rousseauian (or even Hobbesian) state of nature. In the case of the ACE research this has meant that a great deal of the discussion has been couched in terms that rather ignore the fact that the British political system operates on a basis of representative democracy with accountability and responsibility being vested in elected political actors. To demand that politicians be removed from the system in favour of apolitical technocrats is equivalent to demanding a revolution in the political system. There is nothing wrong with such a demand but it should be seen for what it is and this is something that the underlying premise of the research singularly fails to point out.

Methodological Questions

At this stage, the argument needs to move to a different level which concerns the underlying basis of the attempt to discover answers to the questions that the ACE raised. The methodology that was adopted to the research was a straight-forwardly qualitative one. This was a perfectly appropriate one to choose and, on the basis of the various reports that were produced, was undertaken professionally and thoroughly. However, and there is always an 'however', the extent to which such an approach can carry the weight that is then laid upon it is open to question.

In the current case the ACE is hoping to use the 'public value' research as a tool for the development of new organisational and funding approaches and strategies to their functions (Bunting, 2007, p. 28). The difficulty is whether a methodology that provides *depth* of response is actually adequate to provide the *breadth* of response that

is required for a national organisation: in other words, there are concerns about the representativeness of the samples that provided the information that was used. While some attempt was made, for example, to use a socially representative sample of the general public for part of the research (details about sampling can be found in most of the research reports at www.artscouncil.org.uk/artsdebate/research.php), the sample size was far too small to allow for any statistical comfort, and, as a result, the findings are not sustainable at any level above that of the sample itself. The break-down of on-line respondents (Keaney *et al*, 2007, p. 21) suffers from the same un-representative problem: there is no relationship between regional population and number of responses from each region, indicating that the research cannot be taken to be an accurate reflection of the population distribution between regions.

If the findings of the research process suffer from problems of statistical representativeness then the management of the information collection stage also raises some serious questions about the adequacy of the findings that were generated from it. While the ACE is clear that the questions that formed the basis of much of their investigation arose from preliminary discussions with the public the rest of the research has been highly mediated: the questions and issues that have been investigated have been controlled by the concerns and interests of the ACE itself. While this is acceptable behaviour in an absolute sense, in the context of attempting to discover public perceptions of 'value' it is far more questionable. The idea that the arts provide 'public value' may well be self-evident to those with an interest in the field but it needs to be demonstrated, not simply assumed. Too much of the ACE research is based on assumption instead. As a result while a great deal of emphasis is paid to the different ways in which the arts are valued there is no consideration paid to

the point that this assumption is itself actually debatable. Starting from an assumption that the arts are valueless would potentially have raised a different set of reasons for valuing the arts than those which finally resulted.

In this respect the emphasis that was paid to artists and representatives of arts organisations in the data collection stage is a further example of the unrepresentative basis of the research. While these individuals may form a major part of the ACE's constituency they are already, presumably, in agreement with the proposition that the arts provide 'public value' in one sense or another. As such, uncovering any broader conceptions of 'value' is unlikely to occur as the discussion is effectively closed to alternative view-points. Effectively the research, in large part at least, is made up of an enclosed artistic world talking to itself. Discussions of how the ACE may do its job better as far as its existing clientele and potential clientele are concerned is a valid managerial concern and doubtless the ACE will have learnt a lot from the detailed findings that parts of the research process have generated. Using this, however, as a basis for the creation of *national* policies, approaches and strategies is not possible. For that to occur the research would have to start from the premise that it is the wider public that needs to form the focus for policy, not those who are already a part of the existing system.

Again, there is some confusion about the intention of the research: if it were to be presented as simply a management device to investigate how the goods and services that the ACE delivers could be more effectively managed and targeted at existing users then there would be few problems with it (and it would probably still have worked out cheaper than going to firms of management consultants for an institutional

audit). If, on the other hand, it is intended to provide the basis for re-thinking about, and re-designing, what the ACE is doing in terms of its service delivery for the population of England as a whole then it is much less successful. The only way to do the latter is to actually talk to the general public. Focusing on existing users leaves the ACE open to accusations that ‘vested interests’ have dominated the system, and that what has been researched is ‘personal value’ rather any notion of larger ‘public value’.

Conclusion

In effect the ACE has placed itself in a position where it cannot possibly hope to win. The weaknesses of the underlying assumptions behind the ‘public value’ and public service literatures effectively deny the relevance of political rationalities of action in favour of technocratic versions of the same thing. Given that the current version of representative democracy that is force in Britain allows for the possibility of replacing unpopular politicians through the exercise of the ballot, and bureaucratic technocracy does not, then the view contained within ‘public value’ requires an overhaul of the entire British (or, at least, English) political system. At the more restricted level of ‘public value’ that the ACE has adopted, based around ideas of identifying what value is placed on ‘the arts’, then there are still some severe methodological problems to be resolved. The data base that was used is statistically insignificant and cannot, with confidence at least, be used as a mechanism to generate any particular guide to future action for the ACE – or for governments.

At best the ACE will be able to identify some directions for action in terms of their own internal workings. As such the exercise has not been entirely wasted, and the

wealth of subjective data that has been generated will also serve as a valuable resource for further research in the field. These, however, are rather limited successes and it may be that the exercise becomes viewed in the future as something of a missed opportunity not only for the ACE but for all arts funding organisations.

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¹ The ACE operates alongside local authorities, the national lottery and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in this area. As the ACE is the body responsible for distributing national lottery money to the arts it is responsible for the distribution of far more money to this sector than any other individual body in the field.

² It should be noted that the author participated in both the on-line discussion forums and provided, at the request of the ACE, a topic for further discussion.

³ Apostrophes are strongly needed here: this is actually much more of a normative model based around preferred ideas of what the public sector should be doing and how it should be organised to do this. As such it is more of a philosophical construct than an analytical theory.