Full Response

12-Nov-10

Somerset County Council Arts Funding Decision: Full Response

(See Summary Statement or What Next section for details on next steps)

Conservative led Somerset County Council has voted to cut 100% of the £159,000 arts development budget from April 2011.

This decision has been taken despite considerable public support in favour of a 26% cut over 4 years, in line with the proposed grant reduction from central to local government.

We understand that in the future, arts organisations may be able to access funds from a £160,000 Creative Industries budget, held in the Economic Development Unit. This new fund has been set up to support activities with a direct economic value to the county.

It is laudable that the Council, through this potential funding source, are placing value on the economic benefits of the arts. It is baffling however that by cutting the Arts Development fund by 100%, they appear to place no importance on their social, community or intrinsic cultural value.

This is a decision that has profound implications for funding of the arts in the country. In recent years the local authorities have played a vital role in creating a climate in which the arts flourish, enabling the vast majority of people to enjoy the arts as an 'entitlement'.

Quite simply this decision downgrades the arts to that of being an economic driver, a creator of jobs; fostering an environment attractive to businesses. There is no sense of the public benefit that the arts engender.

In Somerset we believe in the transformational power of the arts, their capacity to fire the imagination, their ability to give meaning to our lives and our relationships with each other, a language to enable us to celebrate our common bonds – they empower and enable the 'Big Society'. We also believe all groups in society should be able to access the arts, such as those living in isolated, rural communities or children and young people living in difficult financial circumstances.

We know that this is a view shared by the British public. Recent national research carried out by Ipsos Mori on behalf of the Arts Council of England in 2010 showed that over half of all members of the public surveyed (52%) supported public funding of the arts, with one in six (16%) strongly supporting the principle. Just 14% opposed public funding while a third (32%) of people

‘neither supported nor opposed’ public funding. This broad support for public funding echoes the findings from the Arts Debate, in which it was found that most people believe public funding is important to ensure the quality and accessibility of the arts.

Arts organisations do however fully accept the necessity for all budget areas to be reduced and the need to support services to the vulnerable. It is for this reason that we have proposed a 26% cut over 4 years in line with the suggested grant reduction from central to local government. The arts budget represents just 0.0004 (or 0.04%) of the total county council budget of £350,000,000. A 24% cut would reduce the arts development budget to £118,000, a tiny sum in relation to the overall budget.

From central government there has been a deafening silence. It appears, from their perspective, that this is a local issue and they seem to be willing for the arts to find their own funding equilibrium at local authority level.

What we do know is that the abolition of the local authorities arts budgets will seriously destabilise those organisations traditionally in receipt of funding from several sources. It is also clear from research that the business sector and grant giving trusts and charities will not pick up the slack.

What Next

Arts organisations in Somerset wish to continue a dialogue with the council and as a means of ascertaining public support are currently considering starting an on-line petition.

Councillors will be formally responding to questions about their decision to cut the arts development budget and we may also wish to ask subsequent questions at the next full Council meeting on 22nd December. More detailed information about funding from central government to councils will be available by then.

Please see the Take Art website for all the latest developments on the campaign **www.takeart.org**

ENDS

For more information please contact Ralph Lister or Louise Bennett from Take Art on 01460 249450, or email ralph@takeart.org or louise@takeart.org