

Executive Summary July 2020

**National Cultural
Organisations and
Bridges: working
together to spread
cultural opportunity
for children and young
people in England**

Natalie Highwood and Chloë Bird

The commissioning Arts Council England Bridge Organisations



The Research

This summary highlights key findings from a short investigation into 'national cultural organisations', Bridges and schools, commissioned in early 2020 by the ten Arts Council England Bridge Organisations¹. The Bridges wanted to deepen their understanding of how, why and where these organisations work with schools outside the regions in which they are based, and to explore existing and potential connections with Bridges for this work. The research feeds into a longer-term goal of enabling a more consistent provision of cultural education for children and young people across the country, in particular beyond London.

Key Findings

Both the Bridges and the national organisations who took part in the research want to widen provision of cultural education, and create opportunity for children and young people who have hitherto had limited or no access. Collectively they have substantial knowledge and experience of engaging with schools across England. The research showed that there is openness and opportunity for increased dialogue to:

1. Increase mutual understanding in order to practically benefit current working practices.
2. Explore whether there is a joined-up strategic role to play going forward to further shared aims at a national level.

However, the landscape in which this opportunity exists is not without complexity. There is no single definition of a national organisation or its remit with schools, and nor is there a single definition of a Bridge and its remit. The landscape of schools and cultural education is complex to navigate, and needs to be understood locally, regionally and nationally. Bridges focus first and foremost on their own regions, whilst many national organisations seek to achieve wide geographic impact across multiple regions. National organisations connect into a range of other partners to build their work with schools, and Bridges also work with multiple partners. Both the Bridges and national organisations have finite capacity and each only play a part in cultural education provision. It is therefore not surprising that the extent and ways in which national organisations and Bridges connect varies considerably. Whilst there are many examples of successful relationships, these connections also raise some complex questions.

The Bridges commissioned this research as a starting point for new discussions and to highlight areas for further exploration. As such, it generated a series of key insights and a number of further questions. Some of the main points are outlined below.

“the landscape of schools and cultural education is complex to navigate, and needs to be understood locally, regionally and nationally”

National

The Bridges asked the question: 'what do we mean by national'?

The full research explored the use of the term 'national' in relation to cultural organisations funded by ACE, DCMS and DfE, and organisations operating outside of these funding structures. It found that there is no single definition of a 'national cultural organisation', nor a straight-forward way to determine which organisations work 'nationally' with children and young people.

Whilst many people would see the organisations which receive the highest level of ACE and DCMS funding as 'national cultural organisations', perceptions of 'national' are likely to be driven by a range of factors. These include: funding level and source; touring presence; perceived level of national significance regardless of geographic reach; sector leadership; responsibility for the wider cultural form; brand profile both publicly and in the cultural sector; and whether there are words that signify 'national' in the name of the organisation itself.

For some organisations widely thought of as 'national', the primary focus of national working may not be engagement with children and young people, and, conversely, organisations which are not typically perceived to be 'national organisations' may be undertaking activity nationally for children and young people. Engagement with schools across a wide geographic reach is delivered by a range of organisations of different sizes, scales and funding models. Interpretations of the geographic parameters of 'national' in relation to England and the UK in themselves vary.ⁱⁱ

These factors necessitated a pragmatic approach to identifying organisations to take part in the research. Bridge organisations nominated organisations that they felt had the most relevance in the context of the research. Concurrently, a working definition was developed of: **'a cultural organisation which is funded, as part of its core remit, to regularly engage with schools in at least one Arts Council England Area beyond the area in which it is based'**.ⁱⁱⁱ This definition was then applied to the Bridges' suggestions to reach the final list of organisations to invite to participate.^{iv}

Whilst the list generated was not comprehensive, we hope that it met the spirit of the research brief. Importantly, this process raised a series of questions related not just to what constitutes a 'national cultural organisation', but also to where 'national' impact on cultural education in schools comes from. For example, would it be useful to apply the definition more broadly across a much wider list of organisations, to identify a more comprehensive list of organisations working nationally with schools? Or are alternative criteria needed?

Furthermore, what is the relative impact of an organisation working extensively with schools across a single ACE Area, as compared to the work of an organisation that is working in a more limited way across multiple ACE areas? What is the collective impact of engagement with

"It found that there is no single definition of a 'national cultural organisation', nor a straight-forward way to determine which organisations work 'nationally' with children and young people."

“Going forward, further work is needed to develop a more comprehensive understanding of which cultural organisations contribute significantly to this landscape and to appropriately involve them in future conversations.”

schools by the large number of organisations which tour nationally? Or of large-scale project funded activity? And when engagement is delivered in partnership with local peer organisations, how visible is this as ‘national working’? Going forward, further work is needed to develop a more comprehensive understanding of which cultural organisations contribute significantly to this landscape and to appropriately involve them in future conversations.

How do national organisations work with schools outside their home ACE Areas?

The research brief asked for a basic typology of offers to schools. The research identifies a series of common types of offer, seen from the point of view of the school.

The typology provides a picture of typical activities. In practice, organisations interpret, utilise and combine them in different ways. This ranges from relatively simple approaches, to bespoke models which have been refined over long periods of time. The full research also discusses common variances in approach between different cultural forms, for example museums and galleries and the performing arts.

Typology

- **Learning Visit:** *Experiencing a collection, place, performance or screening by making an independent visit.*

School-led visits with accompanying support or resources. Visits are either to the national organisation’s site or to a regional venue for a loan collection or touring exhibition, performance or screening.

- **In-School Performance:** *Experiencing a performance by a national cultural organisation in school.*

Bookable performances brought to a school with accompanying resources, often as part of a tour.

- **Workshop:** *Learning through a one-off session facilitated by the national cultural organisation in the school’s locality.*

Workshops or sessions in a standardised format delivered directly by a national cultural organisation or their local partner organisation. Typically lasting a half or full day. Delivered in school or at a partner venue. Often bookable on demand by schools.

- **Mass Join-in Activity:** *Joining in with a nationwide cultural campaign.*

A light-touch national celebratory moment or ‘challenge’ related to a specific cultural form, open to all schools to take part and which can easily be taken-up across a whole school.

- **Extra-Curricular Club:** *Exploring a cultural form through a lunchtime or after school activity.*

“Organisations have strong intrinsic drivers for working nationally with schools.”

School-led clubs run to a format provided by a national cultural organisation, with associated resources from the organisation to support delivery of activities.

- **Digital Resource:** *Using specialist digital content to support classroom learning.*

Online content or downloadable materials designed for schools by a national cultural organisation. Includes streaming and broadcasts.

- **CPD:** *Taking part in specialist sessions aimed at equipping teachers with new skills to enhance everyday classroom teaching.*

Skills and content specific CPD for teachers delivered at the national cultural organisation, in a partner venue, in school or online. Ranges from stand-alone sessions to extended CPD leading to certification.

- **Guided Project:** *Running a project led by teachers within a framework provided by a national cultural organisation.*

A project model designed by a national cultural organisation which enables teachers in multiple schools to run similar projects. Supported by CPD, materials and contact with the organisation. Can involve a showcase or festival of outcomes from across the projects at the national organisation’s venue or at partner venues.

- **Direct Delivered Project:** *Working together on a stand-alone collaborative, tailored and time-limited project led by a national cultural organisation.*

Bespoke, hands on project work over multiple sessions developed in partnership and designed to achieve progressive learning. Usually with a single class or year-group.

- **Comprehensive Partnership:** *Taking part in multiple, different activities as part of an intensive, defined relationship with a national cultural organisation over an extended time period.*

A holistic relationship focused on capacity building and legacy, curated by a national cultural organisation working collaboratively with the school to meet specific needs. Often includes cultural organisations being ‘in residence’ in schools for periods of time. Can include an emphasis on children and young people’s talent development.

Why do national organisations work nationally with schools?

Organisations have **strong intrinsic drivers for working nationally with schools**. Primarily these relate to making a difference to a child or young person’s cultural education and by extension impacting positively on their life. Providing access for all; reducing inequality of access; and having a responsibility to taxpayers nationwide are all fundamental drivers.

These drivers link to a **range of other reasons** for working nationally with schools. These include developing audiences, participants,

and artists of the future; changing perceptions of a cultural form; reciprocal learning with schools and local partner organisations; increasing profile of the cultural form and the organisation; aligning with the priorities of funders, and supporting specialist and generalist teachers.

What determines where national organisations work?

There were a number of **common factors which influence where national organisations engage with schools**. These include: geographic proximity to a physical venue (where children and young people will be able to access either the organisation's work or collections, or linked engagement delivered by a peer organisation); a commitment to working in areas of identified need; strategies to be open access; relationships with cultural partners, and logistical practicalities. For targeted work, organisations are often mindful of where other national or large regional organisations are working.

Open access offers often run alongside a **commitment to under-served schools and areas of increased need**. These areas are typically initially identified according to national data such as the indices of deprivation; DfE category 5 and 6 areas; and cultural participation data.

“Local cultural partners are highly valued as trusted collaborators on projects, enabling local relationships to be built and often providing continuity of provision for children and young people.”

How do national organisations connect with schools?

In many instances national organisations have strong connections with **local cultural venues** from the same 'cultural family' with whom they work either in partnership or in lighter-touch ways to engage with schools. Local cultural partners are highly valued as trusted collaborators on projects, enabling local relationships to be built and often providing continuity of provision for children and young people.

National organisations also connect with a **range of other local organisations and networks** to engage with schools. There is significant connection with **Music Education Hubs** by music and opera organisations. National organisations also **build relationships direct with schools** and run **open access offers** which sometimes involve minimal liaison with the organisation.

How do national organisations work with Bridges?

There is a mixed level of direct contact between national organisations and the Bridges outside those organisations' home regions^v. There are a number of strong relationships with Bridges, but also significant engagement with schools where, for a number of different reasons, Bridges are not involved or are only involved in a light-touch way.

Common reasons for national organisations contacting Bridges include making practical connections with schools and local networks,

“Digital resource is one key method used to offer content for higher numbers of schools.”

seeking a Bridge’s guidance on the cultural education needs of a locality; promotion of their activity, and local endorsement. Bridges are particularly valued when they act as conduits to schools that otherwise an organisation would not be able to connect with. Whilst some organisations and Bridges collaborate in the early stages of planning a new initiative, it is more common that involvement of the Bridges is at a later stage.

Further Insights

The research highlights a number of further insights and raises a series of questions:

Scale, specificity and local impact

Many national organisations combine targeted activity with open access offers designed to reach large numbers of schools. Bridges place high value on responsiveness to local need. Even with the most sophisticated models, there is an inevitable **relationship between scale of reach and the level of specificity** which is possible to individual locations and schools. This is a key area for further discussion.

Whilst for some models of working, **consideration of the potential impact on local provision** is central, for other models this is a more nuanced picture. This raises some complex questions. Unsurprisingly, digital resource is one key method used to offer content for higher numbers of schools. It would be instructive to further explore the opportunities and implications of **digital national offers** for local cultural education ecologies and for achieving equitable access nationally.

Understanding local context

The research highlighted the importance of understanding local context in order to appropriately target schools. National organisations frequently draw upon **national datasets** in order to identify areas of low engagement and priority need. However, these require interpretation at a local level to avoid other areas and schools, which would equally benefit, being overlooked. **Granular local knowledge** such as that held by the Bridges is key to this equity of provision. National organisations are working across numerous regional contexts. In light of this, to what extent can they be expected to comprehensively understand **multiple local landscapes?** How can they tap into local knowledge in a swift and straight-forward way?

The research saw a growing emphasis on **place-based models**. It also identified a mutual benefit in national organisations playing a role in **LCEPs** outside their home area. Going forward, what new models of collaboration between Bridges and national organisations do these localised initiatives require? Some participants in the research raised the question of whether national organisations reach **rural and urban areas** in an appropriate balance and with relevant models. This is a key question to be interrogated going forward.

“Overall, the research offers a range of insights and provokes further questions.”

Remits and capacity

There is clear scope for the remits and priorities of Bridges and national organisations to be better mutually understood. Bridges would like to have **earlier and more strategic engagement** with national organisations which are planning work in their region. The fact that Bridge Organisations are of differing scales, and interpret their **varying remits** differently from one another makes it more difficult for national organisations to systematically connect. **Increased mechanisms to connect to the Bridges as a group** should also be explored.

A key complexity is that the **Bridges’ remits are first and foremost regional**, whilst **national organisations are often driving programmes of work across multiple regions**. Given this, to what extent, and how, can priorities be more consistently aligned?

Given that both Bridges and national organisations have **finite capacity**, consideration should be given to what a realistic level of contact would be and how this might be achieved in a straight forward way. Finally, questions related to funding arose: what funding conditions enable a national organisation to have appropriate impact in a location where it has not worked before, or to work at scale in multiple locations? What role does the **funding ecology** play in shaping current ways of national working?

Next Steps

Overall, the research offers a range of insights and provokes further questions. We hope that, together, these can be a catalyst for discussion between Bridges and national organisations and help identify new opportunities going forward.

Thank you

This research was just starting when COVID-19 dramatically impacted cultural organisations. Understandably, not all organisations which were contacted were able to take part. We would like to wholeheartedly thank those who did manage to participate at such a turbulent time.

End Notes

i The ten Bridge Organisations (ACE Children and Young People sector organisations) are: Tyne & Wear Archives and Museums (Culture Bridge North East) – North East; We are IVE – Yorkshire and the Humber; Curious Minds – North West; Arts Connect – West Midlands; The Mighty Creatives – East Midlands; A New Direction – London; Royal Opera House Bridge – East; Festival Bridge – East; Artsworld – South East; Real Ideas Organisation – South West.

ii In line with the Bridges' remit this research focused on activity taking place in England.

iii Bridge organisations were asked to nominate organisations that they felt had the most relevance in the context of the research. The working definition, which was then applied to this list, was adapted from the ACE National Lottery Project Grants definition of a 'national touring project', which references activity taking place in two or more ACE areas: 'where the same public-facing activity (a show, or exhibition, or other public-facing work) is presented in venues in two or more Arts Council England areas. If the applicant is based in one of these areas, then at least 25% of public-facing activity must be taking place in another area...'

Although this definition refers to ACE Areas, not all organisations contacted were funded by ACE. The organisations contacted had a range of funding models including funding from ACE, DCMS, DfE, and organisations outside of these funding structures.

iv Organisations contacted were working in the performing and visual arts, museums, heritage, libraries, literature and film. Not all organisations contacted were able to respond, as the research coincided with the beginnings of the COVID-19 crisis.

34 cultural organisations, and the Bridges took part in the research. The research was primarily undertaken through telephone interviews, combined with a small sample of surveying.

The organisations which took part were: ASCEL, Barbican Guildhall, BBC Ten Pieces, Birmingham Royal Ballet, BFI, British Library, British Museum, Candoco Dance Company, Crafts Council, Donmar Warehouse, English National Opera, Historic England, Into Film, Imperial War Museum, Libraries Connected, National Gallery, National Portrait Gallery, National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain, National Theatre, Natural History Museum, New Adventures, One Dance UK, Pilot Theatre, Roundhouse, Royal Museums Greenwich, Royal Opera House, Royal Shakespeare Company, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Science Museum, Shakespeare Schools Foundation, Southbank Centre, Tate, V&A and Welsh National Opera.

v For many organisations the relationship with their 'home' Bridge is of a different nature to that of other Bridges. However, this distinction is blurred where organisations see themselves as working equally in all regions, or have multiple sites or offices across the country.