

# Making data work

**A scoping survey to develop a mixed-methods  
evaluation framework for culture**

## **Executive Summary**

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# Executive Summary: Introduction

There is increasing interest in the role, value and contribution of the cultural sector and recognition that cultural datasets are currently in a poor state of development and not always fit for purpose.

This brief explores these issues and the learning from the Making Data Work for Public Sector Policy project, led by the Centre for Cultural Value at the University of Leeds.

## A deficit of cultural data?

Better data about the cultural sector would support **better research and decision making**, within organisations and in the policy, funding and infrastructure organisations that support cultural activities. Several challenges are evident. These include:

- Inconsistent definitions of what we mean by cultural activities and the cultural sector;
- Undue focus on quantitative approaches such as cost-benefit analysis; and
- Limited or problematic data to populate any models of cultural value that we might generate.

Current methods and approaches to evaluation rarely involve the artists and other cultural practitioners who engage directly in cultural activities. This effects a sense of **disconnect and disempowerment**, particularly between the local and national levels and micro and macro evaluation data.

## What we set out to achieve

This project aimed to explore the tensions and challenges around data, research and evaluation in the cultural sector, with a particular focus on **involving cultural practitioners** to understand their specific challenges and perspectives.

The project also sought to identify opportunities for how funders, support bodies, and policymakers might better **support practitioners and the cultural sector** more broadly.

Finally, the project aimed to shape and inform the policymaking process by offering **alternative approaches** to understanding the value and impact of the cultural sector.

## Our activities

Our scoping exercise reviewed current data standards and explored the challenges and opportunities involved when collecting, collating, managing and analysing quantitative data, such as existing large datasets. This included the potential to generate new data, whether from new sources or from joining existing datasets.

The second workstream explored the **perspective of creative practitioners** operating at the local level and interrogated the role that creative evaluation methods might play in a multidimensional evaluation framework. This scoping exercise aimed to explore the potential for the City of Bradford as a setting to evaluate the impact of the cultural sector. Thirdly, our work established a **multidimensional planning framework** for practitioners seeking to evaluate cultural activities. Finally, we engaged with **local and national policymakers** to feed into their planning in an iterative way and discuss future options.

The project is therefore based upon **sustained and extensive engagement with practitioners** and policymakers. Their analysis and findings are grounded in the day-to-day reality of working in and with the cultural sector.



# Our findings

## The cultural sector makes a significant contribution to people's lives and to society and the economy – but more work is needed to convey and evidence this.

An important starting point for our scoping exercise is that the cultural sector has a significant contribution to make on its own terms – the contribution of cultural activities to people's cultural lives and capital – as well as in terms of building social and economic capital.

Improving our understanding of how much and how the cultural sector adds value is of interest to policymakers and infrastructure/support bodies, and to those working in the sector.

A better understanding of contribution – what, who, where, how, how much, and why – enables better decision making within organisations, including planning for the future around issues such as workforce, healthcare, education, town planning and finance.

For organisations supporting and working with the sector, there is an ongoing need to justify investment and spending in the cultural sector relative to other demands, with the need to quantify scale and impact and also efficiency and effectiveness. This has come into sharp relief with the evolving Levelling Up agenda.

### Quantitative data about the cultural sector offers significant potential for learning

Our work highlights the need for better and smarter quantitative data to help the cultural sector and its support/policy infrastructure. It highlights that better data can inform research and decision-making, boost efficiency and effectiveness and make a stronger case for support beyond traditional appeals of 'art for art's sake'. However, we have identified several key barriers:

**A lack of shared standards and analytical norms for cultural sector data**, such as definitions of the sector and its component parts. This results in much of the sector, such as unincorporated associations, and its workforce, including freelancers and volunteers, often being hidden from view. This can lead to them being ignored in terms of the sector's infrastructure, contribution and potential.

**A disparate, poorly connected and ad hoc data landscape** that, lacking any strategic direction or impetus from leadership, doesn't always serve the cultural sector and its stakeholders effectively.

**A limited data collection and analytical capability in the cultural sector**, including a lack of strategic leadership in relation to the role of data as a source of organisational and sectoral competitive advantage.

**A significant gap between current approaches** to data collection and current leading practices seen elsewhere in government, society and the economy, such as the use of open and administrative data, new approaches to connecting and sharing data, and innovation around the public benefit role of data (so-called 'data philanthropy').

However, these approaches are unlikely to be successful as individual projects in the absence of any wider community of practice to share and build upon these ideas.

Similarly, the lack of a common cultural data infrastructure and strategy (priority setting, data and analytical standards, data repositories, funding and investment) that has the potential to benefit all cultural organisations will likely limit any future impact towards enabling a data-enabled cultural sector.



## Cultural sector data at the local level: building from the grassroots

Our work also focuses on a specific locality to explore how data and evaluation can help cultural organisations understand the value and meaning of the activities they undertake. Situated in the Bradford cultural community, it offers an in-depth insight into practitioners' experiences and aspirations relating to data and evaluation and the challenges of capturing the impact of their work in appropriate ways. Some key themes emerged here:

The challenge of **effectively capturing the value of cultural sector activity and outcomes**, particularly within the resource constraints many practitioners and organisations face;

The **tension between evaluation and data collection** for upwards accountability and reporting to funders versus evaluation for learning and development (a theme central to workstream three and a theme addresses in the Centre for Cultural Value's [evaluation principles](#));

Roles and responsibilities, and **whether it is realistic and appropriate for creative practitioners to lead evaluation activity** – with a concern that evaluation has the potential to change the activities under observation or risk becoming the core purpose;

An **appreciation of mixed methods**, with a concern that qualitative data (narrative, stories) offer the richest accounts of cultural practice, engagement and impact but are too often poorly presented to, or ignored by, funders and policymakers;

A desire to use evidence to **make a robust case for support for the value of cultural sector activities**, including using data to test causal relationships over time;

**An interest in using tried-and-tested research methods**, such as theory of change, but little or no evidence that such tools and approaches are widespread;

**Little evidence of creative practitioner-led research activity**, despite an interest in this, with organisations preferring to commission a research and evaluation learning partner; and

**A lack of community-wide infrastructure and networks** that might knit together data collection and research activities across the city – but a desire to build a community of practice.

Cultural sector practitioners are keen to undertake research and evaluation meaningful to their learning and development. We identified an appetite and openness for both tried and tested research methods, such as establishing baseline data against which to compare change, and more innovative or novel approaches that might be better suited to exploring cultural sector activity. It is similarly clear that organisations want to build this activity into future work.

The insights from this work are highly relevant to public policy-making. Users clearly understand that high-quality, quantitative evidence is needed to inform public policy and be held accountable. This includes understanding the cultural sector's contribution to economic capital using data and methods associated with the first workstream.

Likewise, there is a strong sense that putting cultural organisations and their participants at the centre of any data collection or evaluation research will likely lead to organisational learning. This includes learning from failure, albeit framed by concerns about how funders and policymakers use evaluation and data.

## Evaluating the contribution of the cultural sector: one size does not fit all

Our work highlights the need for common standards and approaches to data collection, as well as analytical practices, to better understand and convey the contribution of the cultural sector to public policy.

Our work focuses specifically on evaluation practice as a subset of this broader challenge, with a focus on mixed methods that moves beyond our initial scoping of quantitative data.

A fundamental assumption of our work is that a diverse cultural sector needs evaluation tools and approaches that are people-centred – that is, sensitive and relevant to the organisations and activities under review – if they are to be both used and useful.

This requires an inclusive, ethical approach that seeks out voices that are often furthest from the public policy process and often the least heard and represented.

Our work on cultural sector evaluation again highlights the need to build capability. In this case, we found the need to build capability in relation to the potential for evaluation as an activity that adds value to the cultural sector rather than an obligation that drains capacity. But the opportunities that evaluation presents to the sector are again limited by several barriers:

**A lack of capability and capacity within the cultural sector.** These gaps within the cultural sector are mainly in relation to skills, data quality and availability, and an absence of common standards and protocols around evaluation;

**A disconnect between large, national quantitative data and locally generated qualitative data;** Fragmented and sporadic collection and evaluation of cultural sector data; and

Increasingly standardised cultural sector data and frameworks that are **not sensitive to the sector's diversity**.

A limit on the potential for evaluating the cultural sector relates to the predominance of impact measurement. Our work identifies that impact planning and assessment using a broader palette of tools and approaches is more likely to recognise the value that is distinctive to, or different about, cultural sector activities, engagement and organisations.

We propose a new framework for planning practical evaluation in the cultural sector to address these challenges and tensions. Our planning framework frames evaluation as learning, based upon the assumption that embedding this work in the day-to-day practice of organisations will likely ensure its use and value to practitioners. Therefore, it is underpinned by participative tools and approaches that are designed with practitioners in mind.

The planning framework models evaluation as a continuous process rooted in everyday activities and user feedback, rather than a one-off, external event done to an organisation by external bodies. This can help deal with tensions such as perceptions that evaluation is time-consuming or only used for accountability rather than learning. Other characteristics of the framework include mixed methods (an aspiration of practitioners highlighted in the second workstream), with as much emphasis on stories and bearing witness as on metrics and quantification.

The planning framework is aligned with the learning and proposals from across our work, as well as the Centre's [Evaluation Principles](#) for Culture. As such, the framework fits well with the conclusions of the first workstream that several innovations should be prototyped. Prototyping the framework is a logical next step.



# Issues for discussion and next steps

**Although we set out to undertake a scoping exercise focused on data and evaluation methods, our project highlights several cross-cutting themes that have wider resonance for policy and practice.**

## These include:

- Significant strengths of current data resources, with corresponding potential, if these can be linked and made more accessible, or in the case of small organisations, better utilised;
- Substantial data was developed for, with and by cultural sector organisations. Data relating to functions including programming, management and marketing/fundraising offers opportunities for learning and evaluation
- Lack of expertise and engagement with rigorous evaluation amongst practitioners, particularly within the context of limited resources and past experiences of a disconnect between evaluation and subsequent resource allocation;
- Failure of current methods and evaluation approaches to convey the social impact of cultural activity in any compelling way. This limits the investment potential of cultural projects and infrastructure for public and philanthropic support;
- Interest/desire in planning for impact and improvement – i.e. using data and evaluation to set baselines or assess past performance and using this to help plan for future impact;
- Desire amongst practitioners for robust data and methods or frameworks – a recognition of the importance of data and evaluation methods that are taken seriously – and that this requires high quality qualitative and quantitative data that is collected and analysed using common standards;
- Desire amongst practitioners for data and methodological diversity and innovation – is rooted in a sense that a one-size-fits-all approach to evaluation will fail to understand and convey the distinctiveness and nuanced value of the cultural sector. Innovating methods and data could cover quantitative data (such as new sources, including banking data) and qualitative methods, including artistic and creative methods that capture cultural impact on its own terms;
- Need for a common, underlying data infrastructure – to knit together different activities, help develop common norms and standards, and act as a repository of data and research findings; and
- Desire amongst practitioners to build communities of practice around cultural data and evaluation. This could include pooling knowledge and skills or pooling data to enable failing forwards. Data trusts (a model advocated by the ODI) might be worth prototyping in the cultural sector.

## What next?

Our scoping exercise suggests that there is potential to build upon the cultural sector's strengths, data resources, and capacity. Future development work could include:

- The development of common standards and protocols around quantitative data, including the use of unique reference numbers to identify organisations and funding streams, as pioneered by 360Giving;
- Exploring the potential to pilot a cultural data trust and a national data observatory;
- Development of a local pilot policy/practice network for users interested in cultural sector data and evaluation – and then linking these into networks at the national level;
- Embedding the evaluation planning framework principles in policy and practice;
- Testing and refining the evaluation planning framework with practitioners; and
- Embedding the learning from this project in the broader cultural sector policy community.

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For further information please visit [www.culturalvalue.org.uk/making-data-pb/](http://www.culturalvalue.org.uk/making-data-pb/)

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