

One hundred arts organisations face destruction from UK budget cuts

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The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in the UK proposes slashing 29.9 percent from arts funding over the next four years. As a result, 100 arts organisations are threatened with losing their entire funding.

Arts Council England (ACE) has disclosed its “10-year plan for the future”, which includes a new funding process whereby every arts group, organisation or individual will have to reapply to become part of what will be known as the “National Portfolio”. Applications close in January next year and failed applicants will be given one year’s notice in March 2011.

The tightly-controlled funding process will involve recipients reapplying on a regular basis and having to prove themselves worthy of continued funding.

Some of the larger organisations, described as “citizens” of the arts world, which emerge from the new funding process intact will face additional compulsory responsibilities. This will include sharing office facilities, talent spotting and joint fundraising. These organisations will be defined as having a “strategic relationship” with ACE.

The scale of the cuts to arts funding is a direct snub to the protests aimed at exerting pressure on the coalition government to reconsider its stance before the spending review on October 20. This culminated in an open letter penned by 100 artists, including 19 Turner prize winners, to Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt.

The letter stated, “We appeal to the government not to slash funding to the arts and heritage. It risks destroying this remarkable and fertile landscape of culture and creativity ... It will have a particularly damaging impact on smaller-scale museums and galleries and those in the regions. Many of us had our first inspiring encounters with the art in these places. Radical cuts to the arts would force hundreds of them to close or drastically curtail their programmes.”

The burden of these radical changes will fall heavily on the Regularly Funded Organisations (RFO), now known as

National Portfolio Organisations. The decision to target Regularly Funded Organisations is significant, as non-London-based regional funding is particularly susceptible. The capital has always received a greater level of grant-in-aid expenditure as a result of its percentage of the population and its concentration of theatres, museums and galleries.

Various protests are gathering force, but apart from a few lacklustre efforts there is still little opposition to the proposed cuts in establishment arts circles. Into this vacuum step arts leaders and the media, with an ideological campaign to justify cuts.

Sheffield Theatres artistic director, Daniel Evans, said in response to the Arts Council plans, “Any cut in arts funding is, of course, hugely worrying and disappointing. For a sector that recently experienced what has been called ‘a golden era’ (both economically and artistically), it is undoubtedly a retrograde step. However, given the issues surrounding the wider economy, arts organisations have learned to accept that, like other sectors, we too will suffer.”

Evans went on to praise the “speed and clarity” of the Arts Council’s delivery of the changes.

Jonathan Heawood, English PEN director, said, “The new approach is a bit more strategic and interested in organisations supporting arts in a more general way, which might suit us.”

Cathy Bolton, director of the Manchester Literature Festival, describes the climate of savage cuts as a “time of stress” for organisations losing their RFO standing, but added that “ACE was taking a very responsible approach to dealing with the funding cuts passed down by central government.”

Fifty-eight literature organisations will be affected by the cuts, including poetry publishers Carcanet and Bloodaxe, plus Flambard Press, the Ledbury Poetry Festival, the Manchester Literature Festival and Lancaster’s Litfest. Simon Thirsk, chairman of Bloodaxe Books, said, “I do worry about people who have given the whole of their working lives to poetry and

the arts and who may lose funding.”

Unrelenting, ACE chief executive Alan Davey, who remains resolutely in support of the cuts, said, “This is not simply a cuts-driven exercise, it’s something we would have wanted to do anyway.”

The government has insisted that the Arts Council cuts its own operating costs by half—from £22 million to £11 million. It is now wholly focussed on encouraging private investment, repressing opposition to the arts cuts, and encouraging deference to big business.

In addition to the devastating effects of these cuts, many arts groups and local facilities will be forced to close or be left struggling following proposed cuts as a result of sharp reductions in local council funding. Regional centres will be doubly impacted by cuts, as they rely on local authority spending alongside ACE funding.

Beyond London, according to a November 5 *Guardian* editorial, most theatres, orchestras and galleries depend on support from local councils. With the abolition of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, council-owned museums and galleries and their assets, from the buildings to the pictures on the walls, are now the councils’ to sell.

The cuts are set to have a huge impact on arts in schools. The arts education charity Creativity, Culture and Education, which developed learning plans for schools, has had its funding for the next financial year halved to £19 million. Pupils in over 2,500 schools, as many as 400,000, benefited from CCE arts education programmes. CCE’s chief executive Paul Collard points out, “The more affluent middle classes will always provide opportunities for children to take part in the arts and will continue to do so, but there is a real shortage of opportunities for disadvantaged young people.”

In a first for the UK, Somerset Council is proposing to end all direct arts grants—amounting to £160,000—currently awarded to 10 organisations, including film, theatre and production companies. Other councils could follow suit.

The Crucible, The Lyceum and The Crucible Studio—comprising the Sheffield Theatres Group—provide an example of the impact on regional theatre. The group is set to lose more than £94,000 and could also be impacted by changes in Sheffield City Council funding. The council is about to implement a 7.5 percent overall cut in the next month.

Former Labour government minister David Lammy has waded into the arts debate, defending his party’s initiation of arts cuts as an attempt to “move beyond institutions and to

focus our cultural policy on people”.

Christine Payne, the general secretary of Equity, the actors union, was predictably weak in her response. “For Equity, the test of whether this new funding structure is fit for purpose will be the transparency of the criteria by which funding decisions will be made,” she said.

The union, which represents actors, stage managers, dancers, choreographers, designers, technicians, street artists and education facilitators, have been adapting to the commercial debate and focusing on the money that theatre supposedly brings in. This dismisses the importance of less commercially centred theatres and sends the message out to members that such work is dispensable.

Payne also trumpets the “performance specific activity” in Equity workplaces, but this also marginalises the important non-performance-related activities around theatre, such as theatre in education. The feeble Equity opposition extends no further than a plea to “Lobby Your Local Council”.

The coalition government and the department for Culture Media and Sport have absolved themselves of any responsibility for arts education and are instead involved in a campaign to encourage philanthropic contributions. These measures undermine the viability of public enjoyment and immersion in art, which will be at the mercy of individuals and corporations who have a vested interest in commercial values.

A newly relaunched “Matched Funding” scheme challenges institutions to raise private funds and have part of that matched by the government. Already the National Theatre is getting £10 million from Travelex businessman Lloyd Dorfman. The Serpentine Gallery will receive an undisclosed sum from the Mortimer and Sackler Foundation. Lord Sainsbury is getting involved in donations.



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