

Arts Council England pits London against the regions in an assault on culture

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Arts Council England's (ACE) latest funding programme is a wholesale attack on the arts. On the pretext of regional "levelling up," major London-based arts organisations have been defunded and stripped of National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) status in a devastating act of cultural vandalism.

Major arts bodies like the English National Opera (ENO) will lose all funding unless they relocate out of the capital.

Organisations applying or reapplying for support have been struggling with a long-term decline in government funding of arts and arts education. This was compounded by the government's wilful negligence of culture and the arts at the onset of the COVID pandemic. Venues that struggled with the impact of lockdown now confront catastrophic hikes in running costs.

Tension was already high, ahead of the announcement of ACE's 2023-26 budget. The announcement last week generated further disruption. Scheduled for October 26, it was suspended at just 24 hours' notice.

ACE is nominally an "arm's length" funding body in relation to central government, but the delay revealed the reality. On October 25 ACE tweeted, "Following decisions with @DCMS [the government's Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport], we've agreed to delay the announcement" of the budget.

Attributed to the cabinet reshuffle, even though Culture Secretary Michelle Donelan did not move, ACE was doing as it was told. It could not even confirm a rescheduled date, saying only "it will now happen as soon as possible within the coming days."

ACE's feeble "we feel for everyone" being abandoned rang hollow. For London-based organisations, the delay was even more agonising. Former Culture Secretary Nadine Dorries had flagged a programme of cutting London funding in the name of "levelling up." This was ostensibly to spread funding regionally, but predictions of a 20 percent budget reduction fuelled expectations of broad cuts to bodies in the capital and demands that they relocate.

The budget was finally announced on November 4, with

Donelan pushing forward Dorries's scheme. ACE's programme is in line with her plan to move £32 million of funding out of London. ACE Chairman Sir Nicholas Serota said, "We've just simply had to make some invidious choices about where we fund the most."

ACE have been heavily promoting as positives: the broader spread of funding across England; the total of 276 organisations receiving funding for the first time; the average annual total funding budget of £446,264,485 (up from £377,550,919 for 2022-23); the fact that 990 organisations are to be funded, 950 of them NPOs (a rise of 119 since 2018-22); and that 266 London bodies (up by 13) are among the beneficiaries.

None of this disguises the realities. The promotion of some regional arts organisations is being used to dress up a negligible overall budget increase, while individual organisations face static budgets amounting to real-terms cuts. London and regional bodies are being pitted against each other, while London institutions have seen punitive budget cuts.

Nationally and internationally significant and renowned bodies are the victims of Serota's "invidious decisions." The Institute of Contemporary Arts will lose nearly a quarter of its grant (£678,310 down from £878,310), while the Serpentine Galleries will receive only £708,000 rather than this year's £1,215,690.

London-based but broadly national organisations have seen cuts that clearly baffle them. The English Folk Dance and Song Society, which has lost nearly a third of its NPO funding, issued a statement that it "is physically located in London, but it has always been and continues to be a national organisation... the only national organisation which champions folk music and dance at the heart of England's cultural life."

The Royal Opera House (ROH) faces a nine percent grant cut. The National Theatre will lose five percent of its funding, the Southbank Centre 10 percent.

These organisations face attrition. Elsewhere in London, the situation is worse. The Donmar Warehouse, Gate and

Hampstead theatres have all lost all their funding, as have theatre companies Cheek By Jowl and Kneehigh. The “levelling up” propaganda has focused on London venues losing funding, but it is clear there is a wider onslaught: Harrogate, Portsmouth, Oldham, Winchester, too, have all lost funding.

So will the ENO, unless it takes advantage of what is euphemistically being called the NPO Transfer Programme. Under this scheme, companies are required to relocate from London to retain NPO status.

The theatre company Paines Plough is among the 24 organisations which have signed up to this. In part this has been possible because they are a touring company with a portable auditorium, Roundabout, and regard themselves as a national company with a London address.

Paines Plough’s management still point to the axing of funding and NPO status to theatres and companies as casting doubt on ACE’s commitment to new writing in theatre. It will only retain existing funding, which is effectively a cut.

This is not a transfer programme, but a blackmail scheme as seen most clearly with the ENO, which is based at and manages the historic London Coliseum, opened in 1904 and the largest theatre in the capital. Its annual £12.6 million grant will end in March. The company has been offered £17 million over three years to pay for relocation outside London, and “reshaping their business model”, while still managing the Coliseum as a commercial venue. This accords with the philistine view of “culture” as buying in touring productions rather than establishing companies to produce and develop new work.

The ENO attack was made the headline announcement of the programme, and the ENO initially seemed to accept it. A statement called this “the start of a new chapter,” speaking of “creating a new base out of London, potentially in Manchester.”

However, public and industry anger is immense and growing. A petition launched by singer Sir Bryn Terfel calling for reinstatement of the ENO’s funding has received more than 33,000 signatures to date. Former ENO director of productions Sir David Pountney called on Serota to resign, while current chief executive Stuart Murphy has begun meetings with Donelan.

Murphy, a former BBC and Sky television executive, argues that this change undermines the years of local expertise built up in London. It would take years to rebuild this elsewhere, and Murphy is concerned at the limited possibility of private fundraising in a much smaller city like Manchester, which has a fraction of London’s nine million population and global significance.

Murphy pointed to the co-existence in London of different types of opera house, with the younger, more diverse ENO

sitting alongside the more traditional ROH. ACE, however, have doubled down on the cuts to ENO, ROH and other opera companies like Welsh National Opera (a third) and Glyndebourne (halved). ACE director of music Claire Mera-Nelson blithely declared that there was “almost no growth in audience demand” for large-scale productions.

Murphy said the ENO has done everything demanded of it to qualify for public funding, having not “just jumped through hoops but jumped over them.” This has involved access to performances and its development of the ENO Breathe scheme, using singing techniques developed specifically for people recovering from COVID-19 nationwide. The government abandoned the health and economy of the arts when the pandemic struck, and singers were very hard hit. Now they are receiving no recognition for their efforts to overcome that crisis.

The London Sinfonietta orchestra, which specialises in commissioning and making new music, has lost 41 percent of its ACE funding, even though its podcasts, schools programme, and themed concerts have all been praised by ACE.

London Sinfonietta orchestra Chief Executive Andrew Burke reports ACE making clear “there is no appeal process.” What they had heard from ACE about the decision was not “about the quality of our work; it’s more about... larger forces and movements of funding.”

DCMS shrugged off queries with a statement that “Everyone should have access to culture no matter where they live or what their background.” But this is simply a cover for brutal philistinism.

The fraudulent claims of “levelling up” are based on the false premise that, even without its historical standing as a cultural centre, London requires no specific arts support. Claims of attention to accessibility and diversity—from a government which has championed and accelerated social inequality—are used to mask cuts to services meeting those necessary requirements.

Every manoeuvre by ACE and the government seeks to set organisations and regions in competition in a strategy of divide and conquer. The very survival of cultural institutions and artists is under threat, as the bourgeoisie moves to dismantle all the social, democratic and cultural rights of the working class.



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