What works to increase equality of access to culture for lower socio-economic groups - digest

Introduction

The benefits of taking part in arts and culture can be vast and varied: from improving health and wellbeing and critical thinking skills, to increasing sense of community and social cohesion. However, not everyone gets equal access to them. People from lower socio-economic groups are consistently found to be less likely to take part in arts activities or feel that cultural spaces are "for them." This means a lot of potential is going untapped: not just for audiences, but for communities and cultural organisations too. The research report, prepared for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), summarises reasons for low participation in arts and cultural activities among lower socioeconomic groups and identifies what can work to increase engagement at local, regional and national levels. Film/cinema does not feature much in this report but there are still valuable insights for exhibitors when considering where your organisation fits in the cultural landscape of your surrounding communities and neighbourhoods, as well as more broadly as part of the UK arts sector.

You can find the full report on the website: [Research report](#) (published 27 February 2025)

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A note on how 'culture' is defined and people's experience of it

People's understanding of what a cultural activity or event is differs. For example, the report states that higher-status groups are generally engaged in cultural activities defined as 'rarer' forms of arts participation and consumption (including performing arts and creative writing), whereas less affluent individuals are more likely to participate in what is defined as free-time activities (e.g. gardening, going to the pub, or watching TV). The **Beyond the Multiplex** project from a few years ago has a [number of interviews](#) that explore people's relationship to film and other artforms in relation to this.

The Main Barriers

The report highlights 4 main reasons for low or non-engagement. It's important to consider that for some people it could one, several or all of these factors at play, which will require different strategies and interventions to address:

1. Social Factors
2. Economic Barriers
3. Geographical Factors
4. Cultural Factors

1. Social Factors

➔ People feeling a place, event or activity 'isn't for them'. If you haven't grown up with or around people who take part in arts and cultural activities, it falls outside of your social norms. This can contribute to a lack of confidence taking part and a fear of not fitting in, which can be exacerbated for those with mental health conditions.

2. Economic Barriers

➔ Ticket price and travel costs are reported as a key factor in attending events for people from lower socio-economic groups

3. Geographical, Place-based and Physical Factors

➔ Research showed that people who live in deprived areas are less likely to visit museums than those living in more affluent areas, because of the presence (or lack) of cultural venues, inequalities of funding across areas, and social environments that promote cultural lifestyles. Children living in the 30% least deprived areas were two times more likely to perform arts outside of school compared to their peers living in the 30% most deprived areas.

➔ Distance from venues and activities can prevent people taking part, due to travel time and costs. There might be a lack of transport, public or private.

➔ For disabled people and those with health conditions, physical access is also cited as a barrier: the distance needed to walk to a venue can be an issue for those with mobility issues.

4. Cultural Factors

➔ A personal connection and cultural identification with the venue, activity or event plays a role in attracting people from diverse backgrounds. Representation of identities can help with engagement. The report highlights that Asian and black people were 60% less likely to visit a heritage site than white people, and ethnic minority groups highlighted that many cultural events have little or no relevance to them.

➔ Language can also be a barrier: some people who aren't confident with their English speaking skills can feel anxious about asking for help from staff, and some reported being made to feel uncomfortable and unwelcome when they did.

What Works?

There isn't a one-size-fits-all fix. If you're looking to welcome audiences into your venue that up until this point haven't been coming, you're likely going to need to open that door wider, shout louder and listen closer. There are several approaches that can be adapted locally, as well as at a regional and national level.

1. Co-creation

➔ Invite people to help shape the programme, whether that's selecting films, themes or planning events and activities. Work with local organisations to help you understand what is meaningful to them. Create a space and build an offer that is relevant and accessible, that people can feel a sense of belonging and ownership of because they've been a part of it.

2. Hosting events in community settings

➔ Work with other venue partners to host events in places that are closer and familiar to the people you'd like to engage. Libraries, schools, community halls, shopping centres, pubs, sports grounds…if you don't already, get to know your local areas better and the variety of places people spend their time.

3. Tailoring your messaging and how you communicate

➔ If people can't understand what you're offering, what is going to make them show up? Be clear in what your venue/festival/programme is about and what people are going to get from spending their time with you. For some people, the film is the hook, for others it's the place and people screening it. For some it will be the opportunity to socialise or take part in discussions. Others might want escapism, where others want to do something fun with their family.

➔ If you use print marketing, where are you distributing this? Is it the same, trusted places your current audience spends their time? Where *aren't* you going? Local sports clubs, supermarkets and corner shops are great ways to reach lots of people.

4. Keeping costs low

  ➔ Offering flexible pricing and/or subsidising costs can alleviate financial barriers, but this might not help in isolation if people still feel out of place, unwelcome or the programme is not relevant to their interests.

5. Engaging online and offline

  ➔ What content are you able to provide online, as well as offline, that can help with physical, geographical and/or financial barriers, or give people the opportunity to see what you're about? Share Q&A highlights, film chat or behind-the-scenes clips to allow people to engage with your programme in different ways. But don't rely on online content: not everyone has access to the internet.

6. Training and diversifying your teams

  ➔ All staff should be supported to welcome audiences with diverse needs, although the report recognises that there is limited specialist professional training available for front of house staff in particular.

  ➔ Having a workforce that is more representative of the groups of people you're looking to engage can create a greater sense of relevance for those target groups. But, structural barriers within the cultural sector and a fear of not belonging can mean that individuals don't pursue these kinds of roles - or might not know about them in the first place.

7. Involvement at a young age

  ➔ Access to arts and culture in childhood is an effective way to increase engagement later in life. Family, home-life and community settings play an important role in this, with parents from higher socio-economic groups found to be more likely to encourage participation in arts activities.

  ➔ Arts and cultural activities in schools have a significant impact on children and young people who can't afford to take part outside of school, or who aren't encouraged to do so. Where schools can't offer creative or cultural opportunities, other hubs or networks can create provision to address this gap, particularly for

students in disadvantaged areas or those that meet certain eligibility criteria (e.g receive free school meals).

Limitations

The report identifies key limitations when considering the above findings:

→ Some strategies were not implemented on their own, making it difficult to identify their individual impact (or where they were used on their own, they were not enough to increase engagement).

→ In some cases, studies discussing successful interventions were not supported by the evaluation. For example:
  ◆ Evaluation sample sizes were small.
  ◆ They relied exclusively on interviews and cases studies over quantitative data.
  ◆ Methodologies to measure impact were not implemented (measuring participation before and after the intervention or identifying a control group not targeted by the intervention to compare with).

→ Most studies identified in the report focused on short-term impacts, where increasing engagement for groups that face significant barriers and are less likely to engage, may require more time and analysis.

→ The studies do not equally cover the different sectors in the cultural industry, but focus mainly on theatres, galleries and museums. Therefore, strategies and interventions might not translate directly and need to be adapted across sectors.

Case Studies

The report includes 10 case studies from across arts and culture on pages 33-60. There is a summary table with details of the context, activities and outcomes on pages 35-37. The lessons learned are detailed as follows:

➔ Building trust for strong relationships with communities and partners requires long-term approaches.

➔ Funding should move away from a focus on short-term to long-term, in order to develop long-term visions and sustain cultural engagement.

➔ Co-creation with communities can be effective in creating offerings that are relevant, based on an understanding of what local people want, need and value.

➔ Strong networks of partners and stakeholders who collaborate to share best practice and failures is beneficial to the wider cultural sector

➔ Rigorous data collection is required for evaluation of initiatives, alongside collecting baseline data ahead of programme delivery to inform data-led approaches.

➔ Online modes of engagement developed during the Covid-19 pandemic can continue to be used effectively to reach audiences.

➔ Some of the initiatives, such as co-creation, forging partnerships and building trust within communities, were said to be replicable as principles that can be applied outside of the projects they formed a part of.

What next?

Policy recommendations

➔ **Encourage co-creation approaches.** If part of a funding application, co-creation plans should be explicit on how they will do this (e.g. public consultation, involving community members in decision-making and/or in management boards, collaborating with local organisations).

➔ **Promote projects that work in/with local settings** that people are familiar with and feel comfortable in. These can be less intimidating than going to a new place for people who are typically less likely to engage.

➔ **Provide stable and long-term funding** for the development of projects with long-lasting legacies.

➔ **Facilitate collaborations between local and established cultural organisations.** Working with a famous organisation can be successful in attracting people to activities due to a perception that the offer will be high quality.

➔ **Use a combination of strategies.** A single intervention might not be enough. For example, where subsidising costs reduces one barrier, others highlighted in the findings might remain (distance, lack of interest, fear of not fitting in, etc).

➔ **Replicate and scale-up success.**

We need better data

➔ Increase focus on producing research that combines quantitative and qualitative evidence to fill the gaps in data.

➔ Increase focus on collecting longitudinal data to analyse patterns of cultural engagement and impacts of interventions over time.

➔ Improve sharing data and learning across the sector - develop infrastructure to collate and share evaluation, best practice and failures.