

# Breaking free or set adrift?

*Heather Maitland* asks, ‘is this the end of audience development as we know it?’

English audience development agencies have lost their regular Arts Council funding. Local authority organisations say they must focus on increasing earned income to make up for lost subsidy. Rural touring has all but disappeared. Are these just extreme examples or will the spending cuts mean less access to the arts? I asked the AMA membership and 110 of you responded.

First, just how bad is it? In two years’ time, of the respondents whose organisations are currently funded from these sources, half expect their arts council funding to have decreased, 81% expect cuts in their local authority funding and 72% expect cuts from other sources of public funding. Out of the 83 publicly funded organisations, three-quarters faced cuts from at least one source of public funding and 22% expected cuts from all three. But it’s not all bleak: 86% of respondents expected their organisation still to be active in two years’ time with just under a third expecting an increase from at least one public source.

Most of you think your organisation’s investment of time and money in broadening audiences, visitors or participants will not change much: 33% expect investment to be a little less, 31% expect it to be about the same and 22% expect it to be a little more. Just six of you predict that investment will be a lot less, balanced out by the seven who predict that it will be a lot more.

So the picture is mixed. Although four out of five of your comments imply a negative impact on access, your opinions about the changes couldn’t be more diverse (perhaps because you had the option of remaining anonymous).

Some of you think, for example, that the changes will mean audience development will become more important: ‘We are striving as much as possible to protect our marketing budget because the need for audience development will increase, not decrease.’

But others are worried that it will be sidelined: ‘[The cuts] will legitimise the outdated notions of many arts organisations who think that marketing/audience development is a luxury, an unnecessary expenditure line that could be spent on “product.” (Steven Hadley, Audiences Northern Ireland).

Many of you make a direct link between the availability of arts experiences and access: ‘Less money means less art ergo less access – it’s a no brainer.’

Identifying a trend towards ‘safer’ programming decisions: ‘Our company has already been bumped by a theatre who has shown a commitment to us but needed to maximise its income over a 6 month period and another had to cancel our booking as they could no longer run the risk of paying a guarantee.’

While others believe that the impact will be positive: ‘I actually think some of the cuts were completely valid ... Many in the sector have only worked in the arts in a time of boom, but I think we’ll actually come through this stronger.’

It seems to depend on what kind of organisation you work for. Several of you point out that education and outreach has been affected disproportionately: ‘It is most likely to hit education and participation doing work to widen participation ... The audiences that will suffer will be the really hard to reach.’

And it depends on where you live: ‘My fear is that the spending cuts are enforcing the perception of the arts as a luxury for the few [because] in rural areas it will be more difficult to gain access and touring organisations will have to look at their schedules cutting number of shows and venues.’

Many of you think that marketing strategies will change: ‘Funding changes have involved some redistribution, and newly funded organisations will reach new audiences and visitors. But I worry that, in organisations faced with surviving on ... diminished resources, the instinct to concentrate on ... existing audiences at the expense of developing new ones will be hard to resist.’ (Tim Wood, The Place)

But you are divided about whether this focus on existing audiences is a bad thing: ‘While some groups will never want to access the arts and we need to be realistic, recycling our audiences and concentrating on a minority does not make sound business sense.’ (Nick Beasley, Audiences Wales)



'Many [organisations] will realise the value of developing deeper and longer term relationships with audiences as a strengthener of longer term stability.'

And so a lot of you talk positively about a greater focus on customer relationship management: '[My] company's commitment to access means that prices won't be raised, so we have to increase frequency. Time to dust off the customer loyalty programme...'

And this could mean more audience development, not less: 'I think it will encourage more access to the arts as organisations increasingly use high income band audience members to subsidise new audience members and access.'

But some of you predict that ticket prices will become the major barrier: 'Organisations will have to put prices up in order to generate much-needed income, thus alienating further those people on lower incomes and undoing the good work we have done over the last 5 years. The council are introducing admission charges to community museums and this will seriously impact on the range of visitors that will make the effort to attend these attractions.'

In spite of all this, a third of you can see some kind of silver lining: 'Ultimately I think it will stimulate creative thinking and solutions and really ensure arts organisations and agencies are more precisely focused, strategic and targeted.'

And for some, this smarter way of working means the sun is already shining: 'The cuts in funding have forced us to look at problems in a new way ... [so, although] we have a smaller marketing budget, we've totally transformed the way we approach marketing by positioning it at the core of everything we do. Although we can't afford much advertising, what we're doing is informed and tailored and a little seems to be going a long way because our visits are increasing.' (Morrigan Mason, Bodelwyddan Castle Trust)

'The cuts could even mean improvements in audience development practice: There are still low-cost ways of undertaking audience development and the cuts will mean really focusing on audience development that works and shows a return on investment.'

However, this respondent already sees the infrastructure beginning to fragment: 'Organisationally, I have already observed that we are beginning to jostle for survival; there is less collaboration ... as we all scramble after a smaller pot. If you are shipwrecked and holding onto a piece of wood, does it not make sense to stick your bit of wood with the other survivors' bits and build a raft?'

Some see the funding cuts to arts organisations as less important than the impact of wider cuts on our audiences themselves. In general terms: 'The spending cuts will mean that people won't have money to access as broad a range of activities as they once would have. I think arts organisations will have to respond to this in new ways.'

And more specifically: 'The impact of tuition fees on those from less affluent backgrounds is [particularly worrying] ... The one thing we do know about audiences is that those who have gone into HE are more likely to attend and participate in the arts.'

But it's not just our audiences who are losing their jobs: 'Less and less time will be spent on engagement and audience development due to staff cuts. Marketers will only have time to do the bread and butter marketing.'

So, do we give the last word to an optimist or a pessimist? I'll leave you to decide: '[The spending cuts] will have a huge impact, much of which probably won't be felt for a few years to come, but will take a decade to put right.' Or: 'Perhaps the changes will make us all more focused on proving our worth as marketers, with a more professional approach to return on investment.' ●



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