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Alison Plumridge, Bury St Edmunds Art Gallery

Where do we stand?

Sam Evans introduced this session about looking outside your organisation to learn from others, benchmarking and the benefits, as well as practically how to go about it, presented by Miranda Jacobs. This session is about understanding the position we're in, so we can think about where we can go: looking outwards in order to plan better for the future.

Illustrated by a case study from Alison Plumridge, Bury St Edmunds Art Gallery. Miranda started with a quiz, and asked delegates to think about whether they would answer A, B, or C.



Question 1: do you know how your budget measures up?

A: I think it's pretty OK but I don't know how much my peer organisations are spending

B: It was cut last year and I need to make the argument for restoring it

C: I always make sure I overspend each year to prove it isn't enough

Question 2: do you know how well you're doing on internet sales?

A: We're roughly increasing, up by 6% - that's OK, isn't it?

B: OK, but trying to set targets for our business plan and finding it hard

C: I don't really think internet sales would work for us

Question 3: how are you doing in terms of visitors?

A: I only started in this job this year and I can't find any data previous to this years but I'm starting to see a pattern from this year's sales

B: We've increased numbers year on year for three years, and we're pleased but I'm not sure what targets to set for next year

C: We don't really look at numbers through the doors, as long as the sponsors are happy, we're happy.

Mostly A's

You might find that carrying out some benchmarking could really help you to see your organisation in the context of how others are doing, and feel more confident about the decisions you're making.

Mostly B's

Benchmarking could be useful in giving you some facts and figures to help in your planning, in making your case to your funders or board and in setting targets.

Mostly C's

You might find it useful to get out more and think about how other organisations are taking a strategic, informed approach. Joining a benchmarking project might be a real eye-opener. But as a starter, it would be useful to start looking at the data available to better understand how well your organisation is doing.

What is benchmarking?

ADUK has been working on a benchmarking project for 2 years with Miranda, and they have come up with a formula that seems to work for middle scale museums and galleries. They have come up with a definition: benchmarking is *a method for organisations to compare their processes, practices and performance in order to learn and improve their work.*

What does benchmarking involve?

- Existing facts and figures
- Tracking over time – keep doing it so you build up a picture over time
- Comparing of peer organisations – helping you to share good practice and learn from one another
- The simplest form of benchmarking is to compare costs in order to make savings

What is benchmarking *not*?

- Not qualitative – it's all about facts and figures, and what they mean
- Doesn't replace other support networks
- Isn't about new research, but existing data
- Not about measuring for measuring sake – it needs to be useful

10 Step Guide to benchmarking**STEP 1 - Why do you want to benchmark?**

Some reasons.

- Internal advocacy
- External advocacy
- Informing strategic decisions
- Checking how well you are doing
- Identifying areas that may need investigation

STEP 2: Who do you want to benchmark with?

- Similar scale of operation
- Similar art form
- Building-based or touring
- Similar geographical catchment
- Similar audience profile
- Work with a group of no less than 3 and no more than a dozen. Start small and work up

STEP 3: What are your objectives?

Key: think about what you want to achieve and the specific issues that benchmarking will help you with. Keep referring back to these objectives to make sure you stay on track.

STEP 4: Decide what data to collect

OBJECTIVE	DATA	HOW TO COLLECT	POTENTIAL ISSUES

Get the right time frame for data collection – decided on doing it annually.

STEP 5: Can you find any examples from others to help you?

Don't work in isolation – it doesn't work. Find out how other people can help you find quick routes. Talk to audience development agencies, talk to ADUK, and check out their website.

STEP 6: Be realistic

Just trying to answer one objective can lead to a huge number of questions and there is a lot of setting up to do. Build this in.

STEP 7: Understand your partners

Make sure you know who you are talking to and what their organisation is like. Make sure you don't leap to conclusions when you read information – understand the background to the figures and ask lots of questions.

STEP 8: Manage the project well

- Time frame and how often?
- Who collects?
- Who collates and interprets? Someone needs to do this job and be dedicated to it.
- Format?
- How much detail?
- How will the process and information be shared?
- Privacy? A group might be fine about sharing data, but you will need to make decisions about what organisations can use of your data.

STEP 9 - Collect the Information

- Funding reports

- Annual reports
- Project reports
- Box office reports
- Audited accounts

Start by using what you have. These are some of the obvious places, but if it's not in one of these – are you really able to benchmark it?

STEP 10: Troubleshooting

- We're overloaded with data! **Be ruthless.**
- Our data looked comparable at first but, now we've got the results, it isn't. **Make sure you're asking like for like.**
- We can't agree on definitions for our performance indicators. **You might have to compromise in order to get to the next stage – don't get bogged down; look around for help.**
- The data is really hard to access. **If you don't have it at all, then consider some research but make sure it's relevant to the exercise before you do.**
- I'm really keen to undertake some benchmarking but my director won't allow me. **You definitely need everyone on board for this, including finance, programming, etc. Keep the group open and you will have a good range of skills represented. If you still can't persuade the director, pick one benchmark and prove the value.**
- I'm not quite sure what I'm getting out of this exercise. **Go back to the objectives to be clear about why you are there.**
- My benchmarking group can't agree on indicators. **See above.**

Now you can analyse and use the data to inform your work.

Don't forget to continue to benchmark on a regular basis – it only works if you continue the process.

To prove the benefits of benchmarking, Miranda shared the headline results from the *ADUK Galleries Benchmarking* project:

- 7 Galleries
- 2006-7 and 2007-8 data
- 81 indicators
- 3 areas
 - Financial
 - Programme
 - Marketing/Visitor

2007-8 results: financial

Average Turnover	£944,162
Total salaries	41%(% of total staff spend)
Marketing salary spend	7% (% of total staff spend)
Exhibition spend as % of turnover	17%
Cost of Exhibition per day	£527(varies between £71 and £1842)
Cost of Exhibition per visitor	£4
Sources of income:	

- Public Subsidy: 41%
- Contributed income: 31%
- Earned income: 26%

2007-8 results: programming

Average no. of exhibitions	12
Average no. of self-generated exhibitions	10
Average no. going on tour	2
Average no. of venues toured to	3
Average no. of talks	13

2007-8 results: marketing and visitors

Marketing spend as % of total spend	6%
Average total visits	53,323 (ranged between 7,000 and 90,000)
Average unique visitors to website	53,822

Case study from Alison Plumridge, Bury St Edmunds Art Gallery

Bury St Edmunds Art Gallery is in the heart of Bury St Edmunds, a market town that has been active in the Eastern region since the 10th century. It's an independent gallery, running a contemporary art programme, with exhibitions, residencies, talks, workshops, etc. The building is largely 18th century Adams, with the gallery, shop and small office located on the first floor. They took part in the ADUK benchmarking project and outlined the benefits and advantages for them.

They receive core and project funding from Arts Council England (East), county and local council, some trusts and foundations and income generated from the shop. Overall, the project has enabled the entire team to have a better understanding of their gallery and make planned changes. The gallery had been good at collecting data in the past, but not at using it. As well as the ADUK project providing greater understanding, the team are also able to recognise and celebrate their successes; they have more confidence in taking risks and pushing forward the expansion of the gallery. Somewhat unusually for art galleries in these times, Bury St Edmunds is financially stable, receiving more money and taking on more staff.

Alison highlighted a few more ways in which benchmarking had helped Bury St Edmunds:

- Alison used benchmarking alongside trend forecasting to look outside the organisation that will affect the gallery. She also used it to measure success and risk and found it valuable to use with new or existing staff and board members in order to communicate with them and persuade them of plans for change.
- Alison included the shop for benchmarking – one of the easiest things to measure. This has been used to compare income generation over past few years, for example, to look at turnover. Now however, Alison and her colleagues are able to see that whilst turnover has dropped slightly, the income has increased significantly because of the work the shop manager has done on stock.
- Alison is monitoring the situation for the shop very closely in such uncertain times by talking to people running art shops and other not-for-profit galleries about figures and trends – on a monthly basis. But they know from analysing

last year's figures what their real position is and are quietly pleased that they and others in the sector seem to be holding up.

- Bury St Edmunds had highest spend per visitor among the group of galleries and they were able to learn from others how to bring this down.
- Also used benchmarking for education work, so they looked at Sainsbury Centre figures, because they have huge numbers of school groups. Unpicking this helped them to understand their own position.
- By looking at others' data, they have been able to revisit their workshop fees, in the knowledge that they compare favourably with what's out in the region.
- Also invaluable for funders (conservative authority); Alison produced charts to show how much their contribution will lever out of other organisations. They no longer have conversations about proving value for money.
- Similarly Arts Council England funding – been outstripped by local authority funding, and have asked gallery to submit application for additional funding.
- Looking at *Taking Part* research, Alison realised that more people are attending craft events than any other art form in the Eastern region, so they have identified it as an area for audience development that hasn't been looked at. They will be leading on a project in the next couple of years. Research new to sector and therefore valuable.
- In terms of audiences, they have gone to free admission, based on what the research said. Bury St Edmunds will be monitoring this carefully – just in past month audience figures have doubled.