

taking part in the north west

understanding engagement and participation in culture
executive summary

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The full report is available to download from www.northwestcultureobservatory.co.uk

The Northwest Culture Observatory is part of



The Northwest Culture Observatory is the region's strategic culture research and intelligence network and the research arm of Culture Northwest.
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Culture Northwest is the Cultural Consortium for England's Northwest, established in 1999 by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, and its role is to drive the Regional Cultural Strategy. Culture Northwest's core funding is predominantly provided by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Northwest Regional Development Agency. For more information visit www.culturenorthwest.co.uk

The ESRC Centre for Research on Socio-cultural Change (CRESC) is an international research centre funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. It is the first major research centre in Britain to develop a broad, empirically focused account of cultural change and its economic, social and political implications. CRESC brings together the theoretical and methodological expertise of The University of Manchester and Open University staff in disciplines as diverse as Accounting and Finance, Business, Census and Survey Statistics, Geography, History, Social Anthropology and Sociology. For further information visit www.cresc.ac.uk

Taking Part in the North West presents the key findings of a research seminar series on cultural participation and engagement. This series, convened by the Northwest Culture Observatory and the Centre for Research on Socio-cultural Change, University of Manchester brought together research-interested individuals from across the cultural sector in the Northwest – policymakers, administrators and managers, sector researchers, market researchers and academics.

The publication summarises key issues raised through these seminars, identifies directions for future research and signposts readers to relevant research and intelligence. It reflects on a new cross-sector collaboration and knowledge exchange.*

Key Findings and Recommendations from the Seminars

Cultural Institutions and Public Value

- The notion of 'public value' is attractive and persuasive because it connects the issue of cultural provision with popular engagement and participation in a meaningful and understandable way
- The cultural sector continues to seek robust methods to measure the value of cultural institutions and participation to social and economic life
- Traditional econometrics often fall short of capturing value created. New methods of economic evaluation are being piloted in the North West
- Informed use of Contingent Valuation as a method can be a particularly effective measure for the appraisal of culture as public goods and services; this method should always be contextualised by knowledge of service users

Cultural Taste and Participation

- Taste is a key aspect in understanding participation. There is a significant division between those who like many cultural forms and those who are entirely disengaged, showing no positive interest in cultural participation. Research into relationships between taste and participation remains underdeveloped
- It is as important to understand attitudes, drivers and barriers to participation as it is to quantify existing and potential participants. These can be shaped and influenced by a range of factors, including social and economic divisions, opportunities for participation presented by different geographies, as well as less tangible factors such as identity and sense of place
- Combining survey methods with GIS mapping allows data to be 'located' and participation to be examined in conjunction with geography, supporting planning for local infrastructures, facilities and service delivery
- There is more investment into measuring participation rates and frequencies where a causal relationship between participatory activities and demonstrable benefits (or 'hard outcomes') has been established – for example, taking part in sports and physical exercise and health benefits

Space, Place and Cultural Identity

- Combining 'booking' data from arts audiences, survey responses on reported participation and socio-economic profiling data allows the patterns of change in participation by city dwellers to be tracked over time
- For example, changes in arts audiences in Greater Manchester reflect the gentrification of and change to its communities in terms of lifestyle, demographics and income
- The notion of 'elective belonging' is a useful concept in articulating how people make sense of place. People use places as sites to 'perform their identities', by drawing on the imagery of place and attaching their own experiences, situations and life histories
- People critically compare and evaluate their place of residence against other places; cultural engagement and cultural institutions play a strong part in the process of defining and demarcating place

Cultural Capital and Family Transfer

- It remains important to quantify participation in cultural activities, to demonstrate current engagement and provide baselines for audience/participant development
- Qualitative research and its analysis supports statistical findings, to reveal the attitudes and barriers to participation and to illuminate the key drivers for behaviour
- Examining why people don't engage in culture, or only engage to a certain degree, is as important as looking at participation. Amongst a range of influences at work, social background and intergenerational factors are the most significant in structuring participation
- There is a strong case for investing in cultural capital and for interventions which involve families and young people. However, both social class and family context should be addressed with sensitivity in audience development and cultural engagement, informed by further sociological research which addresses intergenerational factors and the diversity of family forms

* This series was one of the outputs of a HEIF2 (Higher Education Innovation Fund) project on 'Manchester's Cultural Institutions', which was based at CRESC in 2004-06 and which sought to build closer ties between university-based research and the local/regional cultural sector. The project was co-sponsored by the Northwest Regional Development Agency and the Higher Education Funding Council for England.