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Roses for everyone? Arts Council England’s 2020–2030 strategy and local authority museums – a thematic analysis and literature review

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Abstract

In this review article I critically reflect on the ambitions set out in Arts Council England’s 10-year strategy “Let’s Create”. My reflections are informed by a comprehensive literature review as well as by my ongoing research into the impact of austerity on local authority museum services. The literature surveyed allows for an analysis both of the alignment between the strategy and broader political rhetoric and discourses of austerity and welfare state retrenchment and of the tension between the rhetoric of "Let's Create" and the realities facing local authorities and publicly funded cultural organisations. I argue that the strategy's indirect acknowledgement of the negative impact of austerity policies is obscured by gestures towards diversity, inclusion and cultural pluralism, which leaves difficult questions of how to translate the strategy's ambitions into actual action unanswered. In conclusion, "Let's Create" is found to be a stark illustration of Arts Council England's acquiescence to the politics and discourses of austerity and the marginalisation of alternative values and practices which, as the literature shows, are alive and well within museums and the cultural sector.

Introduction

On the occasion of the launch of Arts Council England’s (ACE) new strategy for 2020–2030, titled “Let’s Create”, this article is a reading of the strategy as it relates to local authority museums. It is supported by a survey of existing research covering the topic of austerity and the publicly subsidised cultural sector. Its aim is to connect the dots between the vision set out in the strategy and the realities facing people running and managing museums within local government structures or those that have been transferred to one of the range of models that depart from this approach. While the comprehensive literature review conducted for this article found that there has been little work to date on this topic, there are a number of scholars whose work allows for a critical reading of the strategy in a way that prompts reflection on its aspirations. An ancillary aim of the article is to draw attention to the work of doctoral researchers and early-career researchers on these topics, much of which goes unrecognised as it remains dormant in theses due to the increasing difficulty of obtaining the job security necessary to publish from this research.

Since “Achieving Great Art for Everyone” was launched in 2010 ACE has seen its responsibilities extend to museums and libraries after the abolition of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) in 2011. Those concerned with the fate of libraries may find the strategy a promising read with libraries spoken of as “central to our delivery of this strategy” (ACE 2020, p. 22). A commitment to increased investment in libraries is the only financial pledge made across the 80 pages of “Let’s Create”. Detail on how this increased investment will be distributed and to whom, not to mention the matter of those libraries that

are now closed, will be crucial in determining how this commitment is received by library campaigners and staff. Nevertheless, the future for libraries appears marginally more promising than for museums on which “Let’s Create” is relatively silent.

It would be naïve to expect ACE to present an explicit anti-austerity message as they do remain accountable to DCMS, a government department (see Mattocks, 2017). It would also be ignorant of the institutional context to imagine that funding gaps could or would be filled by ACE. Quite apart from the arms-length and additionality principles (see Durrer et al., 2019), ACE has also lost fifty percent of its administrative budget since 2011 and has not received additional monies for its grants either. However, to borrow and amend a formulation from the subtitle of a classic study of policy implementation (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1965), great expectations in London (or wherever “Let’s Create” was composed) might be dashed in Newcastle (or Preston, or Plymouth, or Bradford) if local conditions are not considered. Starting from the premise of considering the influence of local context on the implementation and realisation of policy, the transformative vision of the strategy is in danger of being undermined by the bracketing of difficult questions of “fit” between policy content and local contexts. A decade of austerity and further funding shortfalls following the coronavirus pandemic means these look very different now than they did in 2010.

This is particularly the case for museums funded by local government where financial conditions have altered drastically and seem unlikely to improve. In the nine years between 2009/10 and 2018/19 local authorities have reduced their spending on “cultural and related services” by 45 per cent in real terms (LGA pers. comm).ⁱ In a similar way to other forward-looking reviews published by government departments, agencies and public bodies since the 2008 financial crisis such as the 2017 Mendoza Review (see Davies 2018), the message contained within the strategy as to litany of impacts austerity policies are having both on the cultural sector and on people’s capacity for cultural engagement is obscured by the inclusion of powerful “feel good” narratives indicating that issues of diversity and inclusion are on the cusp of being addressed.- The result is to reduce the dominance of the austerity narrative. This move is problematic on two fronts. It implies there is less regard for and knowledge of the reality practitioners working in cultural organisations face within ACE than is surely the case (see Oakes & Oakes, 2015). Whilst the absence of an explicit anti-austerity message is hardly surprising, greater sensitivity towards these realities would have been welcome and surely permissible, raising the question of whether ACE is unable or unwilling to critique austerity and its effects. It also leaves difficult questions of how to translate the strategy’s rhetoric into actual actions for specific parts of the cultural sector open to interpretation. By presenting an analysis of the issues facing local authority museums drawn from the available literature my aim is shed light on how contemporary conditions complicate a strategy such as “Let’s Create”. Although my main concern is with local authority museums, many of the observations contained within this piece will have relevance beyond this domain.

The article is structured as follows. The next section outlines the methodology informing my analysis as well as the steps taken for the literature review. Some may question the inclusion of such an extensive methods section yet as my aim is to survey academic work to date it is

necessary to set out the steps, I have taken to ensure my survey is comprehensive. This is followed by a thematic analysis of the strategy which is presented in two-parts to reflect the nature of the debates in the academic literature. First, I analyse the way the strategy addresses austerity itself, as a financial and political reality and the suggestions it makes as to how budget cuts might be dealt with at organisational level. Second, I analyse the extent to which the strategy addresses the actual developments austerity has prompted within local authority cultural services. The first section is more general whilst the second relates specifically to local authority museums. The article concludes by contextualising “Let’s Create” both as a legitimacy exercise and an illustration of change in the politics of arts funding and with a call for further research into the way austerity is being experienced across the publicly funded cultural sector.

Methods

The methodology for this article draws on an interpretative approach to policy analysis, outlined most clearly by Dvora Yanow (2000). Yanow’s work is useful for this piece for its response to the tendency in positivism-inflected research to present a view of policy from nowhere in particular. The thrust of an interpretative analysis centres on human meaning and social reality covering such questions as the different ways different communities of meaning interpret the main tropes contained within a policy (e.g., “diversity”) as well as “the consequences of a policy for the broad range of people it will affect” (2000, pp. 4–5).

As a review piece this article is not linked to a study of what those working in local authority museums made of “Let’s Create” nor the way their understandings of its messages translated into its varied implementation. As such it does not take the full range of steps required for an interpretative policy analysis (see 2000, pp. 26–30) but instead takes inspiration from Yanow’s concern to recognise that the same policy issue or in our case, strategy, can have different meanings for different interpretative communities. This article does not claim to represent the views of local authority museum personnel but instead channels insights derived from research for a speculative yet informed discussion as to how local conditions might shape how “Let’s Create” is received by this community of stakeholders.

Two key concepts informed the literature search: the state-subsidised cultural sector and austerity. Each of the state-subsidised cultural sector keywords were searched alongside each of the austerity keywords as shown in Table 1. The keywords were selected via a preliminary reading of 4 doctoral theses on the topic of state-subsidised culture and austerity written from different disciplinary starting points from which all terms that refer to the topic of this review were noted (Crossley, 2017; Knights, 2018; Marks, 2018; Rex, 2018).

Austerity	Sector-Related Search Terms
austerity, retrenchment, recession, budget*, economic downturn, economic crisis*, government cut*, spending cut*, financial crisis*	museums, heritage, “subsidi*ed cultur*”, “cultural sector” “culture sector” “arts and culture” “art museums” “cultural polic*” “public museums”

Table 1. Keywords utilised in the literature search

Scopus and Web of Science databases and key journals were searched using the specified terms in January 2020.ⁱⁱ Studies published before 2008 were excluded at this stage, given that this is the year generally acknowledged as the beginning of the economic crisis. Articles published in languages other than English (>100) were excluded and it is acknowledged that this is a limitation of this review. At this stage studies were included if they consisted of discussion of the global economic crisis and the subsidised cultural sector with no geographic restrictions beyond that of publication language imposed at this stage, as the wider aim of the literature review is to evaluate the range of impacts the economic downturn has had on the sector in different territories. This resulted in 1,791 potentially eligible articles, a large number of which were not relevant due to the search terms recession and gallery being common terms in several research areas. A total of 1,487 articles were excluded based on their titles with opinion pieces also being excluded at this stage. Additional articles and theses were identified through personal communications and forward and backward snowballing. This left a total number of 191 articles to be obtained in full texts for further assessment, of which 58 focused on the UK.

These articles were reviewed in full of which 38 were deemed eligible for inclusion. Articles that mentioned austerity policies as a taken for granted context without further exploration of austerity as a situation in which cultural practitioners at all levels find themselves and must negotiate were excluded. To be included, articles must have addressed the developments or effects that the austerity policies introduced in response to the 2008 financial crisis gave rise to within the state-supported cultural sector at the level of the individual, organisation or the system. As my purpose in this article is to evaluate the way “Let’s Create” addresses recent developments in public museum provision, studies on libraries and archives have been omitted.

Thematic analysis of “Let’s Create”: Part I Accommodating austerity

The first key debate in the literature of relevance to “Let’s Create” has to do with the language of the strategy and the tone ACE has taken more broadly since the coalition government embarked on its austerity programme as a response to the 2008 financial crisis. As Victoria Alexander (2014; 2017) argues in a theoretical paper, there are obligations inherent in the “gift” of funding meaning we need to be alert to the demands of funders and how they work to shape the practices of the organisations they fund. In this vein, writers Jack Newsinger, Paula Serafini, Suman Gupta and Ayan-Yue Gupta have cautioned against the turn to a language of “resilience” in cultural policy where coping with austerity is given a positive, affirmational spin (Gupta & Gupta, 2019; Newsinger, 2014; Newsinger & Serafini, 2019). This work has been important in underscoring the role of ACE in circulating the rhetoric and discourses of austerity. Although their work has different emphases, the critical contribution of their analyses is to underscore not only the politics of such policy documents for their privileging of some political strategies over others but also the way using such language plays a role in constructing and informing a ‘common sense’, guiding understandings as to what is, and is not, an appropriate response to austerity. To draw on institutional theory, the reason publicly funded cultural organisations adopt certain practices may not be because they are necessarily the most effective way to achieve internally determined goals or meet externally driven demands but because of shifts in what is considered appropriate behaviour. The increasing focus on “resilience” can be interpreted through this lens.

“Resilience” makes a claim as to the favoured behaviours and values of ACE and demonstrates an alignment between the agency and central government which many find uncomfortable, if not wholly unsurprising given the accountability relationship between DCMS and the agency (see Mattocks, 2017). A focus on resilience suggests the appropriate response to austerity is one where practitioners and organisations embrace these conditions as an opportunity – to attract private giving, to build fundraising capacity, to increase volunteer participation (see Fredheim, 2018 and Gupta & Gupta, 2019, p. 12) – rather than a regrettable development to be resisted or adapted to, acknowledging that austerity has further destabilised the already precarious economic position of many and hampered the ability of funded organisations in myriad ways. Relatedly, implicit within a language of resilience is the promise that if individuals and organisations learn the necessary skills and develop the appropriate capacity then they will overcome austerity both unharmed and perhaps even improved (see Newsinger & Serafini, 2019, p. 7). That structural aspects such as an imbalanced funding distribution across England might have a role in determining whether an organisation can sustain current economic conditions is ignored in favour of a rationale that puts the onus on the individual practitioner and whether they have the necessary skills to contend with the new reality.

Such perspectives are productively applied to “Let’s Create” as they attune us to the implicit messages contained within the document as well as the issues on which it remains relatively silent. The strategy substitutes “resilience” for “dynamism”, one of four new “Investment Principles”. Yet the substance is the same: cultural organisations need to accommodate austerity by becoming “more dynamic”, “changing both their missions and their business

models” and to “drive improvements” in skills development, governance, leadership and adoption of new technologies (ACE, 2020, p. 49). It is not that “Let’s Create” does not mention the financial context, rather that austerity is named as but one of many “external challenges and developments facing both our sector and the wider world” (2020, p. 10) without further indication of the specific questions these conditions pose for the future role of ACE itself and the viability of the vision it presents for practitioners operating in different contexts.

Adapting to austerity

Amidst pressures to balance budgets and in recognition of the impact of austerity on individuals and communities, many publicly funded cultural organisations have demonstrated their ability to adapt, yet are these efforts aptly termed “dynamism”, “resilience” or “entrepreneurialism”? Such terms suggest an ability to thrive in a continuously changing environment rather than managing to cope and adapt to the conditions one finds oneself in. They also indicate a preference for solutions which ensure existing organisations “thrive” rather than broader communities of stakeholders comprising practitioners, groups and organisations “survive”.

“Let’s Create” speaks of new business models, maximising income, cost reduction and financial resilience – all of which may form part of the adaption strategies of cultural organisations wishing to survive in the contemporary context. However, as several studies drawing on ethnographically informed qualitative data illustrate, there is more ethical substance to sectorial responses to austerity than such terms indicate. The Creative Lenses project revealed that business model change is as much about preserving values as it is revenue streams (Rex et al., 2019).

Nuala Morse and Ealasaid Munro, for example, capture “new forms of collective organisation and resistance” (2018, p. 374) as museum community engagement teams recalibrate “museum objects, collections, buildings and their own professional skills towards the emotional and practical support of individuals, groups and communities in response to austerity” (ibid: p. 372). Also with a focus on community engagement, Laura Crossley’s work speaks of the commitment of museum staff to this work (2017). Both authors cite partnerships as one of the ways local authority museum teams are seeking to address social issues exacerbated by austerity, with Morse and Munro distinguishing between the short-term “conveyor belt” approach to partnership work and the more recent efforts of museum staff to refocus their core work on building long-term partnerships with a concentrated number of collaborators (2018, p. 370). This work provides a glimpse of how the partnership work prompted by funding cuts can move beyond the short-term, instrumental approach shown to be prevalent in Vikki McCall and Kirstein Rummery’s study (2017).

The point here is not that the call for “dynamism” and similar organisational behaviours in “Let’s Create” is not an accurate representation of the reality of cultural organisations post-austerity, rather that it is these terms and not others which dominate the strategy. This

obscures the importance of values and the mission-driven character of many cultural organisations. This attribute gives rise to a diversity of responses to austerity from the development of new forms of political agency which work to generate new solidarities with allied local partners (Crossley, 2017; Morse & Munro, 2018) to funding diversification strategies which keep ethical considerations in mind (Stanziola, 2011; Webb, 2017) to new working groups designed to assess how the risk to collections can be minimised despite increases in income generating activity (Harrison et al., 2018). It is unclear what role ACE sees for these mission-orientated adaption practices given the emphasis placed on market-based solutions throughout “Let’s Create”.

There are those who would argue this is the proper role of strategy, a call to action in the form of imperative directives rather than tangible suggestions for how to fulfil a societal mission in changing economic and political conditions. However, at a time when the cultural sector, particularly those running and managing local authority museum services are hampered by unprecedented funding cuts, it seems reasonable to expect a more nuanced discussion of how societal aspirations of organisations supported by tax or lottery revenues can be sustained within such contexts. While this is not the sole responsibility of ACE, the development of the local authority museum sector, to use a phrase of the strategy, “does not happen in a vacuum” (2020, p. 10). However, the stuff of museums and other cultural organisations is more than a series of economic conditions to be glossed as an opportunity. As Banks’ work shows us “non-economic commitments” typify the sector (2015, p. 41), making the suggestion in the strategy that organisations change “both their missions and their business models” (2020, p. 49) potentially anathematic. It would be churlish to suggest that ACE want to alienate the organisations it supports but it might make its proposals more palatable if it were to place both the values-orientated nature of cultural work centre stage.

Thematic analysis of “Let’s Create”: Part 2

Transfer of control over cultural assets

Over the course of the past decade, amidst pressures to balance budgets, alternative forms of museum service provision that depart from the conventional model of direct management by the local authority have emerged. Local authorities might still be the main provider, but they are now joined by a range of alternatives. Leisure trusts such as Vivacity in Peterborough operate a range of services from libraries, theatres, sports facilities to museums while trusts such as Derby Museums operate multiple museum sites. Both arrangements are based on contractual mechanisms and service level agreements with performance management systems in place. Other entities from social enterprises to voluntary groups often manage single sites after undertaking an asset transfer, a process that can mean they become responsible for funding, governing and operating the museum with a variety of types of accountability relationships with the local authority in place (Rex, 2020b).

Though “Let’s Create” signals towards an appreciation of the role of “the amateur, voluntary and commercial sectors” (2020, pp. 18–19) in the cultural lives of the population, this statement is more of a nod towards recent research demonstrating that the majority of

people's participation in cultural engagement takes place beyond the realm of publicly funded activities (see Taylor, 2016, for example) rather than a commitment to understanding the development and funding needs of the range of operators beyond the local authority which now make up the museum governance landscape. "Let's Create" does not address the museum asset transfer phenomenon nor the range of other governance mechanisms now in use across England such as trusts. Although the point is not made explicit in the main text of the review, ACE's submission to the DCMS Museums Review is forceful in its argument that museums "thrive best when able to operate more freely" (2016, p. 3, my emphasis). This implies a degree of certainty in ACE's stance vis-à-vis these practices and institutional arrangements. Since there has been minimal research into their benefits and limitations, this seems premature.

Consider Nadia Marks' study, one of only a handful of studies into the impact of austerity on local authority museums. Marks compares local authority museum numbers and their governance between 2008–2015 finding "57 [museums] had been devolved to charitable Trusts" during the period (2018, p. 160). Her case studies demonstrate "no relationship between change in governance and change in expenditure" leading to the important finding that "LAs that devolved their museums to Trusts have not yet benefitted from significant financial savings" (ibid: p. 161). Although the financial data used by Marks is for 2013/14, meaning it may have been too early to make such a firm claim, this does force us to question the assumption that cost savings are one of the benefits of devolved governance so raises questions over the use of the term "best" by ACE in its communications with policymakers.

Relatedly, research into how local authorities decide which museum buildings to transfer to community management gives an indication of the financial instability of these arrangements, as well as the clear potential of these approaches to exacerbate the lack of diversity in the workforce given that the unpaid work of asset transfer is only viable and attractive for certain demographics. Fredheim (2018) synthesises research indicating this lack of diversity in heritage volunteering with one report finding "95% of HLF (Heritage Lottery Fund) volunteers to be white and 74.4% to live in areas more affluent than the national average" (BOP Consulting 2011: pp. 29–30; cited in Fredheim, 2018, pp. 623–624). Where less privileged demographics do find themselves managing and operating museums, it is often at significant personal and emotional cost to themselves which is largely unrecognised (Fredheim, 2018; Rex, 2020b). As these points illustrate, management models other than direct state provision are by no means inherently better and in many ways work against the "Inclusivity and Relevance" principle outlined in "Let's Create". There is good reason for agencies such as ACE to remain agnostic as to the "best" model until more is known about how these arrangements impact workforce and audiences, and the nature of museums themselves, and what their wider implications for museum governance might be.

However, this is not merely a case of exposing the lack of evidence for ACE's stated preference for 'alternative' delivery models. One of the justifications ("case for change") articulated in the strategy is "that the business models of publicly funded cultural organisations are often fragile, and generally lack the flexibility to address emerging

challenges and opportunities, especially around the decline of public funding and the growth of new technologies" (2020, p. 9). Here, an effort is made to generalise across the sector in terms of its aversion to change with the emphasis placed on framing the problem as the "lack of flexibility" of "the business models of publicly funded organisations" rather than a systematic lack of funding or a desire to reconcile obligations, commitments or values they have long worked towards with a political moment that sees a much more diminished role for institutions supported by state funds. Such statements should not go unnoticed as they echo and reinforce discourses about failing councils and other public sector bodies, legitimising austerity and allied pro-market transformation programmes. While "business models" do need to adapt following a decade of austerity which seems unlikely to subside, the stakes are important: much like with the discourses of "resilience" and "dynamism" discussed earlier, the problem becomes those described as "inflexible"; they are the ones who must change, rather than current social arrangements and systems of cultural production and consumption.ⁱⁱⁱ

The various forms of governance described above should not be seen as entirely novel, museum trusts have existed since the 1970s and asset transfer models have some features in common with nineteenth-century historical societies pre-dating local authority museums. Museum governance changes over the past decade are not well understood by equating them with these historical precedents, however. Not only have such models become more prevalent due to the particular economic and political circumstances of the present day, but they have paved the way for actors and interests beyond the public sector to shape the form and function of museums. Not only has the role of the third sector and voluntary entities in museum provision increased, new partnership models such as with health and social care commissioners and education providers mean institutional arrangements across the entire landscape are changing (see Durrer et al., 2019, p. 323).

Partnership work and power

Partnership work is presented as being at the heart of ACE's vision for the future. Creative People and Places, which addresses low levels of engagement in publicly funded cultural activity and the Creative Local Growth fund, centred on cultivating long-term partnerships between LEPs (Local Enterprise Partnerships have assumed many of the responsibilities of the Regional Development Agencies or RDAs, see Ward, 2019), ACE and other partners are two examples of existing initiatives supported by ACE which aim to bring together multiple partners for funded projects. An explicit commitment to partnerships is threaded throughout "Let's Create", with the main message being one of encouraging actors "from inside and outside the cultural sector" and "from the commercial, public and not-for-profit sectors" (2020, p. 24) to participate in these projects. Although the resource committed to such initiatives is relatively minor compared to the amount spent on NPOs, this orientation towards partnerships comprising private entities is troubling for local authority cultural teams and other entities involved in cultural provision in several ways.

Organisational capacity to develop and sustain the relationships which are at the heart of successful partnerships is a core concern. It is not only local authority staff who face this dilemma. People managing museums after undertaking an asset transfer or following a shift to a cultural or leisure trust are also likely to question the cost of collaboration, should they be appropriately networked to find out about such opportunities at all. Against this backdrop, there is a danger that the allocation of partnership funds will exacerbate existing inequalities relating to locally authority led or supported cultural provision. Attitudes of arts council representatives have been shown to place value on partnership infrastructure and governance over and above knowledge of local creative and cultural practices and demographics (Durrer et al., 2019, p. 327). Again, this indicates that we can expect widening divisions in the distribution of funding with knock-on effects on the ability of museum services to survive and develop.

The transfer of museum governance beyond the state has consequences for partnership working too, as discussed in a review of the role that museums play in relation to formal education commissioned by ACE in 2016. Writing of the rise of academies and the impact of this on school-museum relationships the review's authors note the difficulty of establishing relationships with schools in an environment where decision-makers are "effectively the CEO of a business employing many hundreds of people, often over a large geographic area" (ACE, 2016, p. 16), an issue which is exacerbated by greatly reduced local authority capacity to do the groundwork necessary to engage such individuals in meaningful relationships. There are clear parallels here with cultural and leisure trusts, particularly those that have national headquarters. While we should be wary of generalising, another issue here is the vocabularies and logics at play in some but not all trust models. A concern with whether there is a business case for partnership work, rather than questions of local interests and needs represents a change of approach.

Veldpau and Pendlebury (2019) and others (Pendlebury et al., 2019; Warren & Jones, 2015) have offered an illustration of the complexity of such partnership work. From Veldpau and Pendlebury's work we see that the involvement of entities other than the public sector can lead to an emphasis on forms of economic development which displace existing communities of stakeholders as neighbourhoods change and become less attractive and/or affordable for people who used to inhabit them (2019: esp. p. 11). Warren and Jones' work questions the desirability of engaging in such schemes based on their finding that it is "highly politicised ecologies of local regeneration" and "prevailing political agendas" that shape these activities meaning partnerships can end up drawing communities and individuals into the "market-based creative economy" as opposed to enabling the creation of "new counter-cultural spaces of practice" (2015, p. 1749). At issue here is not partnerships per se but the distribution of power within these arrangements and the impact this has on the nature of the objectives pursued and individuals engaged (see also Jancovich, 2016; McCall & Rummery, 2017). Important too are the way new practices and rationales of non-state actors are absorbed as common sense by local authority officers, as was the case with the Business Improvement District (BID) company in Veldpau and Pendlebury's study (2019, p. 11). Local authority cultural teams are often nested within departments such as economic development or

regeneration where regional competitiveness and economic outcomes are prioritised (Rex, 2020a), which only compounds the issue of cultural practices and infrastructures being an afterthought to economic outcomes.

Buried within the strategy too is the suggestion that cultural organisations will look to “share services and explore mergers with other organisations” (2020, p. 49), a trend documented by Warren and Matthews (2018a; 2018b). Although the benefits and limitations of these approaches warrant further investigation, the potential implications of this approach can be anticipated by findings from DCMS’s Taking Part survey about the demographics of library users. As Hassan Vawda notes in an article for Arts Professional, “libraries are the only space used proportionally more by Black, Asian and ethnic minority (BAME) audiences than those who identify as White. In contrast, arts organisations and museums are used disproportionately by White audiences” (2020). Such statistics should dampen the ambitions of those who promote the convergence of services (otherwise known as “co-location”), a move that seems likely to further alienate BAME audiences from the public cultural domain.^{iv}

Understanding the state of local authority museum services post-austerity

“Let’s Create” is oddly silent on how a changing political-economic climate troubles several of the aspirations laid out in the strategy, particularly as they relate to local authority museum services. There has been little work on the effects of the austerity programme on local authority museum services in particular, however researchers have observed how austerity is being managed at organisational level in other arts organisations such as theatres, art galleries and museums funded by DCMS. Several of these studies characterise austerity as a clear impediment to the aspirations contained within cultural policy, yet they also point towards examples of how cultural organisations have made every effort to maintain their values whilst implementing cuts.

Oakes and Oakes chart a series of changes from the discontinuation of youth projects to what they call the “morally ambiguous” behaviour of underplaying “funding cuts” in a bid to obtain funding in an increasingly competitive environment (2015: esp. p. 47). Abdullah et al. identify changing “accountability structures” as alternative sources of funding replace public subsidies as well as the displacement of “socio-cultural values” and “identities” as “market solutions” risk the marginalisation of “certain groups” who are less likely to spend which “may be counterproductive to the government’s own policy initiatives of, for example, widening citizens’ participation in the arts sector (2018, p. 183). Sanders and Hohenstein comment on the way taxidermy collections are being disregarded (2015) while Reeve and Shipley (2014) argue a link between how people feel about where they live and funding cuts to heritage and Morel notes the way business interests are prioritised in planning decisions with an impact on the archaeology profession (2019). Of particular relevance to different aspects of the vision laid out in “Let’s Create” are Mermiri’s paper showing a decline in private investment in the arts, troubling the assumption that this can fill the gap left by public sector reductions (2011), and Newsinger and Green’s (2015) research which identifies

creative approaches taken by organisations looking to lessen the impact of austerity on their work with people with disabilities yet highlights an ongoing struggle to afford the necessary expertise to continue this work.

The research on local authority museum services finds there have been closures, a rise in outsourced and volunteer run museums (Rex, 2020b) and reduced morale (Bowden & Ciesielska, 2014). Authors drawing on different data sets have come to different but not altogether opposing conclusions as regards austerity's impact on basic functionality. Newman and Tourle draw on their report for the Museums Association based on a survey of 140 museum services to show how cuts have manifested in "cuts to budgets, opening hours, events provision and specific departmental staff levels" (2012, p. 297). Marks' work, based on 19 case studies of local authority museum services identifies a more complex picture where some museums had increased opening times, while staff teams became increasingly orientated towards "fundraising, marketing and other commercial roles" to the detriment of "curators, conservators and learning staff" and "an aversion to collecting" (2018, p. 200). My own research identified an emerging trend for local authorities to withdraw funding from museums located in towns and villages in order to prioritise city-centre sites (Rex, 2020b), based on the assumption that potential visitors would travel into the city alongside broader council strategies prioritising the visitor economy. The aspirational tone of the strategy must be read in tandem with these contextual factors otherwise we risk imaging futures that are not connected to the day-to-day realities facing individuals and institutions.

Concluding remarks

The point of departure for this piece was a concern to speculate on how changes to the structures and practices of public cultural provision complicate the positive visions put forward in "Let's Create". It is my hope that this article has achieved its two aims: to synthesise the growing literature on the way austerity has made itself known in publicly funded cultural organisations and to outline, in part, the complex network of factors which make the contemporary local authority museum domain a distinctive context with which policymakers must contend. It is too early to say whether the rhetoric of "Let's Create" will be translated into meaningful policy actions and what its effect will be at the level of local authority cultural services. The "Delivery Plans", to be published annually, may provide some clues about the intentions of ACE. Yet, whether this seemingly seismic shift in emphasis makes a tangible difference to the shape and character of cultural practices across England by, for example, changing the way funding decisions are made and the level of scrutiny the employment and workplace practices in the sector are subjected to will need to be assessed in 2030, after the implementation stage has passed. Quite apart from whether the vision set out in "Let's Create" is realised, it is essential to acknowledge the shifting grounds on which public cultural provision rests. It is, after all, only two decades since the publication of "Renaissance in the Regions" which led to the first programme of annual financial support from central government to non-national museums (bar a handful of anomalies). Nicholas Serota's name is found in the front matter of both documents yet the contrast in tone of the documents is striking. Where "Renaissance in the Regions" argues a case for "sustained

funding into the future” and 13 explicitly names four government departments it believes ought to contribute to its vision, “Let’s Create” advocates for support for individual creative practitioners, remaining relatively silent on its position on cultural institutions such as museums.

Surveying the literature for this review article indicates a consensus about publicly subsidised cultural organisations being engaged in a process of negotiating austerity leading to a range of forms of change across governance, management and working practices from adaption to resistance; about the effects of these dynamics there is an emerging yet small evidence base, yet what little evidence we do have has not percolated into ACE’s latest strategy.

Notwithstanding that “Let’s Create” makes a concerted effort to claim the continued legitimacy of ACE by means of signalling that the latest research into the inequalities which mark the cultural sector both in terms of workforce and participation (e.g. Brook et al., 2018; Taylor, 2016) have informed its latest strategy, its lack of substantial contextualisation indicates a need for ACE to ensure it is listening to cultural workers (both professional and amateur) who are keeping museum spaces and other cultural facilities alive. Whilst this may be happening with the agency, such efforts are invisible within the strategy itself. One thing to remember, however, is that ACE employs just shy of 500 staff. It is probably not helpful or conducive to fair assessment to think that this is a homogenous group, likely in amongst the strategizing there are those activities occurring in parallel that over time might add up to desirable change. Those of us writing about these efforts should perhaps maintain a keen but appreciative eye on the shape of things to come.

More research is needed on the shape that austerity has taken across the publicly funded cultural sector and within individual local authority cultural services. A particularly pertinent question given the significant inequalities that mark local authorities in terms of their capacity to continue to fund museums and other cultural services is the way that austerity might have quite different effects from one region to the next. Though the condition of the public museum poses several questions in terms of the way social inequalities have been shown to limit access or how they can be located in relation to the development of industrial capitalism, local authority museums remain an important feature of urban and rural society in the UK. They are key sites where the social, economic and political contexts of our time play out. Understanding the specific shape museum services are taking in a context of economic and political change is important if we are to understand the nature of the institution we call ‘museum’ itself. Such understandings should also be at the heart of ACE’s work as it looks to identify what types of infrastructure are needed to create inclusive organisations and cultural ecosystems capable of addressing the evolving needs and aspirations of cultural practitioners and audiences as well as the particular forms of support and funding mechanisms they require from an organisation such as ACE in the long term.

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ⁱ Cultural and related services is one of the expenditure categories used in the financial statistics collected by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). There are three sub-categories: culture and heritage, recreation and sport and other. These sub-categories are divided into 12 discrete categories which are worth listing as an illustration of their variety: archives, arts development and support; heritage; museums and galleries; theatres and public entertainment; community centres and public halls; foreshore; sports development and community recreation; sports and recreation facilities including golf courses; open spaces; tourism and library service.

ⁱⁱ A list of the databases and journals covered is available from the author.

ⁱⁱⁱ I thank the reviewer for prompting me to expand on this point.

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