

The challenge of delivering arts and cultural support to refugees

Executive Summary of evaluation report of Refugee Action's South East Arts and Culture Project

Hybrid was commissioned by Refugee Action to evaluate our South East Arts and Culture Refugee project. The evaluation is not an assessment of individual projects but a strategic evaluation.

Introduction

This evaluation provides a strategic overview of the work of the Arts and Culture Refugee Project in the South East which ran from April 2005 till March 2008. The evaluation focuses on the aims of the project and while it acknowledges the changing context, both in terms of demographic change and arts sector support, it does not comprehensively evaluate these areas.

Research methods

The evaluation took place from the end of February through to April 2008 and was guided by the project objectives. Since the evaluation commenced as delivery drew to a close the evaluation relied on interviews, background research and quantitative and qualitative findings with those who had previously accessed the project.

Arts organisations and refugee/community organisations that we contacted were accessed via the SE Arts and Culture Refugee Project as well as drawing on Hybrid's contacts nationally. We carried out a number of one-to-one interviews and also assessed information produced by the Community/Arts worker. Interviews with artists were deliberately kept informal.

Context/Infrastructure

The South East has experienced considerable change over the last ten years. Recent changes to government structure have impacted on refugee/asylum seeker service delivery. The new UK Border Agency has been given the over-arching strategic aim to 'secure our borders and control migration for the benefit of our country'.



The community cohesion agenda, which has the potential to play a significant role has moved from the Home Office/UK Border Agency to the Department of Communities and Local Government.

The South East is seen as a diverse region. There were consistent suggestions that the region lacked a cohesive infrastructure, particularly in relation to refugee issues. Some stakeholders commented that there were few opportunities to share or disseminate information. Low numbers of refugee community organisations and refugee artists also impacted on how and where the project could develop.

The advisory group was seen as providing a means of dissemination and a source of information and specialist knowledge that produced a sense of 'regional connectedness'.

Refugee Action

The Arts and Culture Refugee Project was based within Refugee Action's Stockwell, London office. Being based within a refugee community organisation had benefits for the project. A number of individuals that we spoke to commented that they had accessed the Arts and Culture Refugee Project through Refugee Action. The Community/Arts Development Officer had access to specialist knowledge and expertise relating to the needs of refugees and asylum seekers but could also signpost individuals onto this support.

Individuals and organisations developed a strong relationship with the Community /Arts Development Officer. However, this did not always lead to a wider engagement with Refugee Action. This is not a problem per se, since organisational relationships are inevitably based with individuals. However it may have an impact after the life span of the project.

In interviews with staff based at Refugee Action and those with whom the Arts and Culture Refugee Project worked, we consistently identified a clear sense of need, often beyond the capacity of the part-time, three days a week, post. The issue of resources is one which affects all organisations and identifying funding streams can be challenging, with the arts rarely a priority. Within Refugee Action, arts or culture-led projects are required to source local, rather than national, funding. The amounts drawn in are often, therefore, relatively small sums in the region of £5,000.

The project has been highly successful in maximising resources by working with organisations and individuals to draw money into projects. However, this did not draw down further funding for the Community /Arts Development Officer post. It may, in future, be worth considering how this might be achieved, potentially through a management or support fee.

Arts Council England South East

For Arts Council England South East, the Arts and Culture Refugee Project was a pioneering piece of work. Arts Council England South East (ACESE) now feels strongly that work with refugees and asylum seekers should not now be dropped, particularly given the advancements that have been made.

Of equal importance is ensuring that individual knowledge is spread throughout organisations. However, ACESE no longer has access to managed funds that could continue to support this area of work. Future activity will almost certainly need to be funded through the Arts Council's Grants for the Arts programme however ACESE is keen for this area of work to continue to develop. In researching current levels of engagement, only one organisation had explicitly highlighted that they would be working with refugees and asylum seekers. However, this information contradicts our findings, which were that a number of organisations had been engaged, or were consistently engaged, in this field.

Refugee Arts and Culture Project: outputs

From the information provided by the Community/Arts Officer, the Arts and Culture Project exceeded all of the targets set. Some of these were shifted following the collation of more information, however on the whole the targets were more than met. Particular targets to draw out are that 25 artists were supported individually and in partnership with other organisations and that the Music in Detention conference received a particularly good response. Partnership development work with local authorities was recorded as a key area for future engagement.

Refugee Arts and Culture Project: artists

Artists discovered the Arts and Culture Refugee Project in a range of ways, some by word of mouth for others it was coincidental. A high proportion of the artists with whom the project connected were from a literature background.

The artists were unanimously positive about their experience of working with the Community/Arts Officer and were concerned as to how the work would develop in the future. Many of the artists and arts organisations stressed the challenges of funding, and being seen as able to deliver projects or longer term work.

Artists frequently looked to London for support, often as a result of the weak refugee infrastructure in the South East. They raised concerns regarding the perception of refugee artists as a refugee first and an artist second.

Refugee Arts and Culture Project: arts organisations

A number of organisations have been, or are engaged in, working with refugees. This evaluation did not seek to provide a comprehensive overview of this area, but picked up on partners with whom the Arts and Culture Refugee Project had been involved. Organisations such as Lewes Literature, Chichester Theatres and PEN had all run projects. Organisations such as Bandbazi and Music for Change had been consistently involved in this area and continued to develop their engagement.

The Arts and Culture Refugee Project also provided a 'brokerage' role between arts organisations and services focused upon the needs of refugees and asylum seekers. This was seen as essential. For some organisations, partnership with the Arts and Culture Refugee Project was seen as vital to their engaging with the refugee sector.

Refugee Arts and Culture Project: Refugee Community Organisations

The Arts and Culture Refugee Project made contact both reactively and proactively with refugee community organisations. With organisations such as Dover Detainee Visitor Group, it raised levels of awareness regarding the role of arts in addressing non-arts agenda.

Similarly, Migrant Helpline increasingly began to develop arts-led work with refugees and asylum seekers from a specific participatory/delivery perspective. Their relationship with Music for Change drew together both refugee sector understanding and arts sector skills.

The directory produced by the Arts and Culture Refugee Project provided a key tool to raising awareness of refugee community organisations and organisations developing with refugee communities.

Strategic directions

Work within the arts and refugee sectors continues to develop ways of working that connects with organisations vision, aims and remit. The recommendations produced recognise that if work is to continue it must connect with work taking place, and not duplicate activities. Themes particularly picked up are those relating to the advisory group and the changing demography in the region, specifically in considering the needs of refugees and asylum seekers.

Four models have been put forward for consideration. These are: 1. to do nothing and rely on work developing independently; 2. to work together as an advisory board/trustees/consortium and employ a development worker to deliver on targets; 3. to work together as a collective, with each organisation delivering a project/projects as agreed by those on the group; and 4. to work individually to deliver work.

Conclusion

There is clearly a strong demand for the work of the Arts/Community Officer and the SE Arts and Culture Refugee Project. The evaluation identified that there was a need both within the arts and refugee sectors which had partly been addressed by the project.

The evaluation also acknowledges capacity issues that may need to be addressed if the project is to develop further. This may be achieved through a strong partnership approach that picks upon and supports the work taking place within organisations and does not seek to duplicate this. Ensuring that this work is connected and strategic, without being a resource-heavy organisation will enable wider engagement and development in the South East.

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