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## Creative Culture's January 2004 Consultation Draft Guidance on Integrating Cultural and Community Strategies

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### Summary of Comments

#### General points of agreement

We strongly endorse the rationale supporting the case for integrating cultural and community strategies.

The Consultation Draft is right to emphasise the complementary and overlapping nature of both community and cultural strategies.

We support the consultation draft's analysis that there are key factors inhibiting integration.

#### Points that we believe need to be emphasised or developed

An understanding of, and confidence to speak about, culture supports the possibility of developing a richer, more nuanced Community Strategy, one closer to the lives and aspirations of communities.

There is often a reluctance to speak about the 'values' dimension of culture.

It is vital that the process of developing, reviewing and implementing community strategies pays proper attention to the values dimension.

The strategic danger is that culture will be valued and prioritised **only or primarily** to the extent that it is able to demonstrate its ability to deliver to a range of relatively crude indicators under priority headings that reduce, for example, 'learning' to exam performance, or assessments of 'quality' to the findings of user satisfaction surveys.

We are concerned that decision-makers could find themselves deciding **between** different cultural pursuits - for example, between play and museums, between theatre and flower-arranging - on criteria that are external to their own key objectives.

Whilst supporting the need for integrating cultural priorities into community strategies, we

believe that, in the longer term, culture should be designated a distinct Shared Priority, equal in status to any others. This would be in addition for the requirement to vertical integration across other Shared Priorities.

Outcomes in the cultural sphere cannot be reduced to the collection and assessment of quantifiable data. There is a need to develop evaluation tools that incorporate subjective, value-based judgements.

A note of scepticism needs to be sounded about the utility of summarising case studies and the lessons that might be drawn from them.

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### Comments

#### Introduction

1. These comments are based on work undertaken with PLAYLINK to produce its Guidance 'Play as Culture'<sup>1</sup> - this included interviews with a number of the original cultural strategy pilot authorities - and the commission to design and implement Portsmouth's cultural strategy development process leading to the publication of 'From the hill to the sea: transforming the cultural life of Portsmouth', now formally endorsed by the local authority and LSP.
2. This is a Common Knowledge response to the Consultation Draft endorsed by PLAYLINK.
3. By 'culture' we mean the inclusive 'ways of life' characterisation highlighted in the DCMS Guidance 'Creating Opportunities'.
4. The comments below follow the structure of the consultation draft.

#### The importance of culture

5. We strongly endorse the rationale supporting the case for integrating cultural and community strategies. Portsmouth's cultural strategy formally recognises the vital nature of this integration within the strategy's formal objectives:

***Objective one:*** radically to transform and invigorate Portsmouth's cultural infrastructure

***Action:*** ...by incorporating cultural priorities into the 2004 - 09 Community Strategy...'

6. An understanding of, and confidence to speak about, culture supports the possibility of developing a richer, more nuanced Community Strategy, one closer to the lives and aspirations

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<sup>1</sup> endorsed by DCMS, DTLR (now ODPM) and DfES

of communities. In particular, the ability to understand, articulate and give equal weight to the two aspects of culture identified in 'Creating Opportunities' - the *material* dimension and the *value* dimension - is an enrichment of the language of decision-making. This also has a bearing on questions of evaluation, measurement and 'evidence-based' decision making. We return to this in later comments.

7. Our experience has been that there is often a reluctance, perhaps even a sense of embarrassment, to speak about the 'values' dimension of culture and cultural services. Where this is the case, the prospect for enhancing the quality of people's lives and their felt sense of well-being will be diminished.<sup>2</sup> PLAYLINK's 'Play as Culture' makes the key point that a:

*'cultural strategy is the opportunity to respond to fundamental questions about children, families, communities and wider society'....Local authorities have not, however, always seized the opportunity to start from the very beginning.'*

8. Now that cultural strategies are to be integrated into community strategies, we are concerned that a reluctance to start with fundamentals will be reinforced. Where this is the case, the fear is that there will be a self-imposed limited understanding about children's and adults' cultural lives. There are particular issues in relation to the validity of children's own culture and a need to recognise both this and ways in which children may participate in the cultural life of their communities. It is vital that the process of developing, reviewing and implementing community strategies pays proper attention to the values dimension.

9. The Consultation Draft is right to emphasise the complementary and overlapping nature of both community and cultural strategies. As stated, both have 'at their core the intention to improve the quality of life of local people' and are 'based on an inclusive approach to improvements, actively seeking to broaden opportunities for all sections of the community'.

### **Wellbeing - the opportunity for cultural development**

10. It is accepted that for those authorities where the value of culture is well established, it may in practice not matter to any great extent that the Statement of Shared Priorities make no explicit reference to a distinct cultural priority heading. However, the concern must be that, taken together with the withdrawal of the Cultural Strategy Performance Indicator, the value of and focus on culture, and the services that provide and support cultural expression, will be diminished.

11. The strategic danger is that cultural services will be valued and prioritised **only or primarily** to the extent that they are able to demonstrate an ability to deliver to a range of relatively crude indicators under priority headings that reduce, for example, 'learning' to exam performance, or assessments of 'quality' to the findings of user satisfaction surveys. This could have a particular impact on, for example, how children and young people's free time is valued and provided for. It is still not widely understood that play is a vital aspect of children's cultural lives. Such an understanding is distinct from, though complementary to, the more widely accepted view that play contributes to children's general health and development.

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<sup>2</sup> The consultation draft makes useful points about this in Section 6A.

12. Where cultural pursuits have to meet criteria external to their own primary objectives, individual cultural services and distinct forms of cultural expression are potentially left without an independent leg to stand on. Where this occurs, cultural services - for example, play, sport, museums or flower-arranging - competing for scarce resources for services that are in the main discretionary, will potentially be judged not by the inherent value of the activity, but by which is best placed in particular local circumstances to meet non-cultural priorities. The ability to affirm that, for example, play, sport, museums, and flower-arranging are equally valuable in their own terms could be lost. Such an outcome would degrade cultural life itself.

13. The danger is exacerbated when account is taken of points made under 'Barrier two: lack of empirical data on cultural impacts'. The Consultation Draft accepts that work is needed to secure a 'robust basis for the complex ways in which culture contributes to our quality of life' and that 'impact and longitudinal studies are still in short supply...'

14. Assuming for the purposes of this argument that such a 'robust basis' can indeed be developed, what appears to follow from the acknowledged current absence of reliable data on cultural impact, is that the only 'reliable' indicators available are those external to culture itself. In such circumstances, the danger is that resourcing decisions in respect of play, museums, sport and so forth will be made in relation to their claimed individual capacity to, for example, reduce crime, raise standards in schools, or assist women into the labour force. In such circumstances, a framework is constructed that, in principle, pits one form of cultural expression against another. Decision-makers could find themselves deciding **between** play and museums, **between** theatre and flower-arranging, on criteria that marginalise and displace their individual key objectives.

15. Whilst we support the need for integrating cultural priorities into community strategies, we believe that, in the longer term, culture and cultural services should be designated an independent and distinct Shared Priority, equal in status to any other. We are therefore making the case for both vertical and horizontal integration: culture within its own Shared Priority category *and* integrated across other Shared Priority headings.

### **Barriers, challenges and solutions**

16. Whilst it may be the case that the power of 'promoting wellbeing, aligned with the Statement of Shared Priorities, new freedoms and an emphasis on developing local initiatives and solutions, provides fertile ground for the innovative integration of cultural development with community planning (Consultation Draft Para. 3.1)' there are, as the consultation draft identifies, significant barriers to their achievement. We support the analysis that key factors inhibiting integration include:

1. misunderstandings, and a sense of discomfort, about culture
2. the significant dangers inherent in dispersing cultural services to larger, multidisciplinary departments

3. lack of leadership at both Member and Senior Officer level
4. the absence of robust mechanisms able to translate strategic policy commitments to action on the ground
5. the view that local communities do not value culture - a self-fulfilling analysis when combined with bullet point No. 1 above and an over-reliance on opinion poll data that attempts to rank people's desire for cultural expression and cultural services within the same framework as, for example, their wish that there be less crime
6. the complexities associated with working in partnerships, lack of clarity about what constitutes a partnership, and an imbalance of power or influence, not always acknowledged, between partnership members:

*'There has been a tendency to use the term "partnership" to describe almost any joint engagement between two or more parties. We believe this to be unhelpful*

*and, ultimately, undermines the development of trust-based relationships'.*

*From the hill to the sea*

17. Barrier two in the consultation draft focuses on 'lack of empirical data on cultural impacts'. Our view is that the consultation draft as a whole has been too cautious in its approach to evaluation. The draft correctly identifies a culture of monitoring and assessment that aims to be 'evidence based' and that there is 'a strong feeling that if it can't be counted it won't be focused on'. It is noted that various studies are being undertaken that aim to offer more robust evidence on the impact of culture. However, there are prior questions that appear not to be fully addressed in the discussion about assessment and those are 'what counts as evidence?' and 'evidence against what category of criteria?'

18. We want to suggest that the *category* of criteria against which evidence needs to be sought are statements of value. What *counts* as evidence are individual judgements about the extent to which a value is adhered to or expressed in particular actions. For example, judgements about whether a 'culture of permission'<sup>3</sup> is being created, or whether children are being allowed to 'assess and take calculated risks'<sup>3</sup> in their play will ultimately always be a 'matter of opinion'; but opinion that can be supported by a range of arguments, perhaps even opposing arguments. What counts here is that a common set of values is being endorsed in the act of discussing how and whether they are being expressed in performance. Reaching final 'objective' judgements is not the point, nor indeed possible. However, where discussions about values and their expression form part of a dynamic, dialogue-driven, evaluative framework, the aspiration to achieve continuous improvement may have better hope of realisation.

19. Our view, then, is that outcomes in the cultural sphere cannot be reduced simply to the collection of quantifiable data. Such data represent but one perspective, however necessary.

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<sup>3</sup> Source: From the statement of values and principles in 'Best play: what play provision should do for children', published by Children's Play Council

In part the difficulty stems from decision makers fear of making subjective judgements, as though these were somehow inherently invalid or suspect. In fact the capacity to make and argue for such judgements is itself a vital part of our culture, a part that overlaps with political processes and is therefore by its nature a source of debate and contention. To value culture is to feel confident to use a language appropriate to it.

20. Portsmouth's cultural strategy has proposed that work be undertaken to develop an evaluation tool explicitly encompassing both judgement and measurement: SAART - Specific, Assessable, Achievable, Relevant, Timed; 'assessable' encompassing, but not being limited to, measurement.

## **Conclusion**

21. This paper endorses many of the points made in the Consultation Draft, whilst highlighting key areas where we believe a different approach needs to be developed.

22. An additional area that calls for a note of scepticism to be sounded is the belief in the utility of summarising case studies and the lessons that might be drawn from them. Our experience has been that these types of case study have a part to play in highlighting possible lessons to be learnt, provided that they are understood as illustrative of certain salient features of a situation rather than representing any sort of 'good practice' model. The danger is that short, summarising studies might be taken to offer the whole story whereas, as is well known, real situations are complex, fluid, and place and time specific. What we have tried to mark here is the distinction between 'knowing about something' and 'knowing what to do'.

Bernard Spiegel  
26 February 2004

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