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Measuring culture

A couple of recently published documents have sought to calculate the value of the nation's cultural life. As part of the continuing search for the definitive case for leisure Jonathan Ives browsed them both.

With the chancellor having to downgrade even his own meagre but determinedly optimistic expectations for economic recovery, the UK's fiscal outlook seems to be further enveloped by the darkening gloom. It is hardly a propitious time for the sport, leisure and culture sector to be espousing its worth but a couple of recently published documents have made an attempt. A few weeks before the chancellor's autumn statement condemned the nation's public sector to a further six year's of austerity the Cultural Learning Alliance (CLA) published Imagine Nation, a paper that attempts to establish the value of culture within education. It was preceded only a few days earlier by Measuring National Wellbeing, a discussion paper published by the Office for National Statistics as part of the ongoing initiative, launched by the prime minister in 2010, to provide some non-fiscal measurements by which to judge the state of the nation.

To the seasoned leisure professional's eye Imagine Nation, which is subtitled The Case for Cultural Learning, will be the more familiar document. Its objectives are clearly stated – "This publication is a contribution by the Cultural Learning Alliance to the current debate about the transformative role played by the arts and heritage in the lives of young people" – and it makes bold claims about the document's ability to provide definitive advocacy: "The Cultural Learning Alliance believes that the arts and heritage have the power to transform young people's lives. This document sets out how, and why." It argues that the "collaborations taking place between cultural institutions and those directly involved in the education of children and young people are remarkably cost effective" and that the "quality of that culture is a measure of the way we live". The sentiment that at "a time of social and economic stress, the case for cultural learning is stronger than ever" may resonate among leisure professionals but it is perhaps not something that the Treasury will find quite as persuasive.

However, Imagine Nation does its best to find something that Treasury officials and their Whitehall colleagues might find palatable. The list of signatories is very impressive, starting with the CLA chair, Lord Puttnam, and running through many of the greats of the arts and culture establishment, and the selection of quotations which runs throughout the document is extensive, illuminating and varied, running from Einstein (who notes "In times of crisis, only imagination is more important than knowledge") via the chair of Google, PriceWaterhouseCoopers and Steve Jobs to the New York Times.

The document's main sections explain the significance and impact of culture's contribution. The Unlocking Learning section explains that learning is about more than school and the value of partnerships between schools and cultural organisations. Exploring Identity looks to culture to open children to experiences beyond their own, while Building Knowledge offers "clear evidence that cultural learning produces positive educational and social outcomes. Generating Wealth, more obviously aimed at the Treasury, makes the case for culture's contribution to imagination, which is essential to innovation and invention, the main drivers of scientific and technical achievement. Creating Community is perhaps the political crux. It notes that in "a period of turbulence and crisis" during which "disruption to the world economy has been echoed by the disruption on our streets" it is an abrogation of responsibility and an act of political folly to abandon imagination and creativity. "The case is entirely pragmatic", it argues. "This is not the time to restrict the opportunities available to children and young people by narrowing their imaginative horizons." With a timely nod to the recent riots, the document also notes that the "values that are embodied by our arts and heritage are central to our identity as a nation, and help to bind our society together".

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The final section of the main body of the Imagine Nation document is headed The Principles of Cultural Learning, which offers a ten-point explanation of the CLA's fundamentals and notes (in point 10) that "Cultural learning has clearly evidenced educational and social outcomes". While the bibliography that follows is not vast, it does contain documents from beyond the usual cultural suspects. BOP Consulting, the CBI, DTZ Consulting and Research, PriceWaterhouseCoopers and the US president are all names with which the Treasury should be familiar and all have supportive things to say about culture and heritage in education.

Measuring National Wellbeing is a different type of document. As befits a consultation document, it is solicitous rather than persuasive but it serves to illustrate some of the assumptions and approaches to sport, leisure and culture within government. The document's introduction explains that the Office for National Statistics' Measuring National Wellbeing Programme was launched "to provide a fuller understanding of 'how society is doing' than economic measures alone can provide" as part of "the national debate" on measuring national wellbeing during 2010-11. The aim of the programme "is to develop and publish an accepted and trusted set of National Statistics that helps people to understand and monitor national wellbeing".

While the use of initial capitals for 'national statistics' no doubt illustrates the importance such definitions and measures are accorded within government, the history of the Office of National Statistics itself – set up to provide independent and inarguable statistics for government, statistics that have then been ignored or denigrated by the government when politically expedient – raises its own questions. However, the document talks of a continuing debate and the importance of individual wellbeing to the concept of national wellbeing, and recruits some aspects of sport, leisure and culture to its cause. More worryingly for the Con-Dem coalition government, it also explains that "equality, fairness and sustainability issues are part of national wellbeing measures".

Somewhat belatedly, having already outlined the proposed domains of enquiry, the document explains what it means by 'domains': "A domain is an 'area' within which potentially a very large set of measures could be chosen." The domains chosen to reflect our national wellbeing are governance, the economy, the natural environment and individual wellbeing. This last domain comprises sub-domains of "our relationships", health, "what we do", "where we live", personal finance, and education and skills. Specific reference to sport, leisure and culture comes under 'what we do' which "aims to include work and leisure activities and the balance between them". 'Where we live' involves "an individual's... local environment and the type of community in which they live", although without any leisure reference.

The proposed measurements are to be compiled from existing statistical databases, such as the ONS statistical bulletin and the labour force survey, supplemented by questions added to the British household panel survey. These household survey questions, which include enquiries into "satisfaction with your spouse/partner" and "satisfaction with your social life", have attracted much of the press headlines to date but questions such as "satisfaction with your job (if employed)" and satisfaction with the amount of (rather than satisfaction with) leisure time do seem to suggest a somewhat bizarre attitude to wellbeing. However, the consultation period runs until 23 January 2012 and the opportunity for change remains.

Of the two documents Imagine Nation is perhaps of more use to the leisure professional. Although it takes a familiar approach to cultural advocacy, it adds some weight to the arguments in favour of cultural investment. The document's politically challenging language is no doubt a reflection of the experience among its signatories, while its bibliography, along with its many quotations, may well reward further reading for those seeking to bolster their own arguments. The value of the ONS consultation document is less obvious. One might argue that any governmental interest in non-financial understandings of individual and collective wellbeing, particularly interest so publicly backed by the prime minister, is positive for leisure but it is difficult to escape the suspicion that the wellbeing exercise is anything other than a political cul-de-sac. The generous use of inverted commas ("how society is doing", "an 'area'") hints that the ONS is not entirely comfortable with this line of enquiry and that they are operating outside their normal linguistic environment.

Most notably, the questions proposed within the document prompt yet more. What business does government have making enquiries into one's domestic relationships? Having solicited all this information, what is the government then

going to do with it? Is a national government, particularly a Tory-led government, going to pursue policies to improve the mood of miscellaneous individuals to boost the nation's overall happiness quotient? Or is it more likely that it will formulate policy on the political practicalities of getting elected? Given the government's approach to environmental crisis, which is already proven and is already having an impact on the nation's wellbeing, it seems unlikely.

Most pertinent to the sport, leisure and culture sector are the questions of whether this consultation document reveals a genuine understanding of and empathy for sport, leisure and culture, and whether the wellbeing programme might result in additional support and investment for the sector. On both counts one is tempted to conclude the chances of a positive answer are not good.

Imagine Nation: The Case for Cultural Learning is available online at www.culturallearningalliance.org.uk

Measuring National Wellbeing is available online from the Office of National Statistics at www.ons.gov.uk/ons

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