Welcome to the Cultural Value Scoping Project

An initiative supported by Arts & Humanities Research Council, Paul Hamlyn Foundation and King’s College London, in partnership with Arts Council England

The report of the AHRC Cultural Value Project was published in spring 2016 and has been widely welcomed and discussed within the UK and internationally. It was the culmination of a three-year Project to fund new research as well as to consolidate and analyse what we know about the value of cultural engagement and arts participation. The report examined a large body of evidence across areas where arts and culture are said to make a difference to individuals and society; it highlighted research and evaluation of particular interest, including the findings of 70 academically-led initiatives funded by the Project; and it challenged many assumed benefits where evidence was unconvincing and approaches not sufficiently rigorous, while at the same time highlighting hitherto neglected areas of benefit. The aim of the report was both to improve our understanding and to move the debate on to more fruitful ground. In resisting the emphasis on short-term advocacy, which has often dominated debate in this area, the report spoke to the concerns of academics, the cultural sector and arts practitioners, and those responsible for shaping policy.

The Arts & Humanities Research Council, Paul Hamlyn Foundation, King’s College London and Arts Council England, building on the recommendations from the AHRC Cultural Value Project’s report, have come together to undertake a scoping project to explore how research, evaluation, evidence-building and analysis into cultural value might best be supported in the future. This eight-month project will consult across the UK with practitioners in the cultural and creative sectors, researchers in higher education and beyond, policy-makers and funders. The aim is to gather views on what approaches would best meet the needs of these different but connected constituencies and what approach or organisational structure might best support those approaches.

Discussions in the coming months as part of this consultation will shape the conclusions and options identified in the scoping project and cannot at this stage be anticipated. Some issues do, however, seem important to be considered for any future activities. These will include identifying research gaps and assessing their significance; making current research and the existing evidence base more widely accessible, especially to arts and cultural organisations and policy makers; establishing a sustained conversation with those making and advising on policy to develop approaches recognised as credible not only to them but also to the cultural and academic worlds; and developing modes of evaluation and evidence gathering that are genuinely helpful to the arts and cultural sector in its own work as well as being relevant to funders and policymakers. All of this builds on and develops the outcomes of the AHRC Cultural Value Project.

Other important questions might include the need for cutting-edge research to inform organisational improvement and learning in the cultural sector and, more broadly, the demand for genuinely collaborative, cross-sector approaches, as well as the appetite for a space where new, innovative, inter-disciplinary and more ‘risky’ research ideas and approaches can be developed and tested. These might include arts and humanities-based research methods whose importance were highlighted in the report. The overall objective of the consultation will be to capture a wide body of opinion, experience and knowledge in order to ensure that any future initiative that emerges goes beyond sectoral and disciplinary boundaries, is genuinely helpful to the range of constituencies and, where appropriate, challenges existing approaches.

10 October 2016