Embedding quality insights from participatory arts into Arts & Health commissioning
New opportunities for commissioned arts are a great development for the sector! …but it’s important that commissioning supports artists in delivering their highest quality work with and for beneficiaries.

What I’d like to share today = insights from participatory arts sector on quality & commissioning.

Recent evidence highlights weaknesses in procurement processes & partnerships, affecting quality. Luckily these also suggest what’s needed to enhance next practice.
Where these insights come from:

**Artworks UK initiative**

*My parallel research for Creative Scotland*

England’s **Cultural Commissioning Programme**

- Unprecedented coverage and engagement of sector across whole UK
- Investigating broad concepts of quality and how best to foster it
- Major arts-in-healthcare pathfinder programme, concluded last year
For participatory arts this means focusing on what supports the best participant experience/outcomes and building in those elements ...

This has obvious significance for Tendering & Conception

Participant outcomes hinge on quality & authenticity of their experience

Artworks: Quality Features
- Inspiring and engaging
- Participant-centred
- Purposeful, hands-on
- Progression for participants
- Ownership for participants
- Suitably situated and safe

‘Global’ laws tell us that quality features can only be designed in at outset (Chartered Quality Institute)
Another global ‘truth’: The only part of quality that can be actively managed is ensuring conditions are in place for it to occur...

And then making sure that subsequent processes don’t ‘degrade’ them

Artworks data reveals what artists believe are essential conditions for quality ... and that they are often missing

(Marino 2007)
Essential conditions for quality occur only ‘sometimes’ or ‘rarely’

- **Occurs Frequently**
  - JOINT PLANNING or DEVELOPMENT (57%)
  - CREATIVE INPUT TO BRIEF (48%)
  - FEELING PROFESSIONALLY VALUED (35%)

- **Only Sometimes**
  - BUY-IN AND TRUST (70%)
  - TIME TO BUILD RELATIONS (61%)
  - REALISTIC PARTICIPANT #’S (61%)
  - REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS (56.5%)
  - CLEAR CONTRACT (52%)
  - REFLECTION TIME (43%)
  - UNDERSTANDING OF BENEFIT (65%)

- **Happens Rarely**
  - ADEQUATE RESOURCES (52%)
  - REFLECTION TIME (48%)
  - REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS (30.5%)
  - TIME TO BUILD RELATIONS (28%)
  - REALISTIC PARTICIPANT #’S (22%)

*Frequency of essential quality conditions, from artists’ viewpoint*

*Reported by percentage (%) of artists*

(Dean 2012)
Why does this happen?

Quality often isn’t within full control of the artist commissioned to deliver the activity or project...

Many preconditions are in the power of external partners or stakeholders who are not there on the day ‘in the room’ with beneficiaries

i.e. participant recruitment, facilities, resource
Arts education evidence from USA reveals how decision-makers “outside the room” have powerful influences on the likelihood that those in the room will have a high quality experience.

Therefore mutual understanding between partners is vital and those with influence to fulfil conditions must be brought into dialogue on quality.

(Seidel et al 2010)
Other Artworks findings back this up…

Research capturing artist experiences with partners reports decisionmakers:

• influencing outcomes in ways that practitioners find unsatisfactory
• enforcing unsuitable content control

Consultations in Scotland highlight:

• under-developed relationships
• unrealistic expectations of work
• absence of a common language

(Consilium 2012a, Pheby, 2012, Sellers 2014)
Cultural Commissioning Programme report suggests such issues persist specifically

**Gaps in contracting practice** from both the artist and commissioner sides

**Artists lacking experience / expertise in negotiating service contracts**

**Commissioners limiting scope of arts work by predetermining service parameters in tenders**

... observing that “existing systems are often not fit for purpose”

(NEF 2016)
What does this mean for arts & health commissioning?

Our commissioning and contracting process is when partnerships are forged and discussions had about the work and what it will achieve. This is when quality features need to be identified and built in.

How do we want the project to look and feel for the beneficiaries?

What conditions need to be in place for this desired quality to happen, and how will these conditions be provided for?

How will we know that we’ve achieved this ideal?

Given the influence of those decision-makers outside the room, **being on the same page on these questions** across the circles is crucial.
Tools for inspired partnerships?

- These insights & dynamics sit at the heart of Arts Council Wales’ and Creative Scotland’s new quality frameworks.

- Scotland’s [Is this the Best it can be? toolkit](#) aids discussion for early planning and design. Artists can use it with partners commissioning or hosting work.

- In 2017 Creative Scotland funded [pilot projects with artists and their non-arts partners](#) to explore a more engaged partnership approach using the toolkit.
Artist-partner case studies reported:

Overall enhanced project outcomes & partner relationships

“Neutral ground” for “conversations on a level playing field”

“A safe, open platform to raise concerns in the first stages of new partnerships.”

“A translation matrix to marry and make sense of partners’ divergent aims”

Opportunities for dialogue that didn’t exist before

Enhanced mutual understanding

... Thereby enhancing communication across the ‘circles’

(AWS 2017a, b, c, d)
This pilot shows value of engaging partners in dialogue during early stages

By...

- **Investing time in project conception** with partners, placing participant needs at the centre

- Developing **realistic understanding** of desired quality and how to achieve it **together**

- Identifying and **facilitating quality features** from the start
1. Recognising **role of others beyond the artist for quality** - particularly in facilitating quality conditions needed

2. Acknowledging that **roots of quality lie in Conception and Contracting** – emphasising engaged partnership in early commissioning stages

Wrapping up

Two key insights arise from all this
Opportunities

OUTCOMES-BASED PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY and talk of RESULTS-BASED PAYMENT ➔ now is an important moment to ensure commissioning systems are designed to foster quality

We and our partners all desire for our work to be as good as it can be, to represent the OPTIMUM INVESTMENT of our time, money and effort ➔ If partners work together to identify and fulfil conditions for quality, the chances of achieving it increase

Quality is not static but allows CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT ➔ with inspired ‘partnerships for quality’ we might continually raise the bar for what is achieved and achievable
Find out more

Look me up at QMU to access papers OR email rblanche@qmu.ac.uk

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Insights for employers, commissioners and funders in facilitating quality impacts through participatory arts

Download this BRIEFING PAPER online (Rachel Blanche, November 2014)
Sources referenced

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• AWS 2017b. Templar Arts and Leisure Centre Case Study, Artworks Scotland, December 2017, Edinburgh: Creative Scotland
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• Dean, F. 2012. Research report: Learning from Artworks Scotland Peer to Peer networks, prepared by Dr Fiona Dean, October 2012. Edinburgh: Creative Scotland
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• Salamon, E. 2013. Understanding Participants' Views, September 2013, London: PHF
Links to further reporting & toolkits

• Arts Management Quality article Redefining notions of quality in participatory arts

• NCVO blog piece, Embedding quality in your commissioning practice

• Insights for employers, commissioners and funders – short briefing paper

• Developing a Foundation for Quality – full report with extensive data

• Is This the Best it Can Be? toolkit, Creative Scotland

• Quality Principles for Wales, Artworks Cymru/Arts Council Wales