



Leading with Purpose Further Reading & Resources:

The Policy, the Impact,
and the Mismatch

by John Riches

**A NEW
DIRECTION**

We create opportunity

Analysis: The Policy, the Impact, and the Mismatch

by John Riches

It bears emphasising that the experiences of the ten leaders outlined in **Voices of Change** in our series **Leading with Purpose: Cultural Education in Practice** and the sector in general (myself included) have often been the result of, and in response to, a policy environment that, for decades, has created instability rather than support. These barriers were not random misfortunes – they were the direct outcomes of shifting political policies and ideologies. As the timeline above indicates, cultural education leaders have needed to develop adaptive survival strategies to navigate the resulting challenges – either in pragmatic defiance, or in pioneering practice; sometimes both.

Here are a few examples detailing how this has played out:

The Market-Driven 80s/90s:

Some of the leaders interviewed began their work in the shadow of the Education Reform Act (1988), which introduced an element of market competition into schools. The ERA fundamentally changed the purpose and management of schools by introducing the National Curriculum. This standardised what knowledge was 'valued' and, inevitably, narrowed the focus onto core, examinable subjects. Local Management of Schools, forced schools to manage their own budgets, making them run like small businesses, while League

Tables created a public ranking system based on exam results, incentivising schools to prioritise resources towards subjects that would boost their position.

The direct consequence of this market logic was that non-core subjects like drama, art, and music were increasingly viewed as dispensable frills. They were the first to be cut when budgets were tight, as they were seen as less likely to contribute to a school's league table position. It also led to a loss of specialist art teachers, further diminishing the quality and availability of creative experiences for young people.

With arts provision receding inside schools, creatives across the country set up shop outside of them. Their work on housing estates, in youth clubs, and in community centres wasn't just an alternative; it was often the only access point to creative activity for entire communities of young people.

The Social Inclusion Era (New Labour):

The policy focus on the Creative Industries and programmes like Creative Partnerships spawned a new language of 'social inclusion' and access. Cultural education leaders learned to frame their work within this agenda, securing funding by demonstrating how they reached marginalised communities. This era opened doors but also began the shift towards project-based, outcome-driven

funding that led to increased administrative burdens.

The Austerity Shock (Post-2010): The austerity programme nearly eliminated youth services in many areas. It drastically cut local authority funding, and led to the widespread collapse of arts organisations and the infrastructure they relied upon. The human (and, ultimately, sectoral) cost of this policy was clear from one leader's recounted experience: returning from maternity leave in 2010, they found that their entire professional network had 'disappeared'. This was a generational loss of opportunity, a political approach that permanently altered career trajectories, and in short time erased hard-built infrastructure.

Government initiatives, even well-intentioned ones, often fail due to a clumsy mismatch with reality. The Access to Work Scheme is a prime example of this. It is a vital lifeline, but its inflexibility around travel and freelance work frequently makes it a problematic barrier. A policy designed to enable disabled workers often ends up adding another layer of bureaucratic administration to navigate.

Subsequent to the changes wrought by the ERA, we can link the further decline in art teachers to the increase in tuition fees (2004 and 2006) and the introduction of the EBacc in 2010 (which was later scrapped

in late 2025). These policies – respectively, further embedding market logic into education, and privileging STEM subjects – systematically strangled the talent pipeline that the sector depends on, forcing leaders to combat the downstream effects of upstream decisions.

When the policy goal shifted from ‘social inclusion’ back to ‘artistic excellence’ following the McMaster Review (2008), leaders had to pivot again – a youth theatre project was no longer necessarily just about building confidence and self-esteem, it was about ‘nurturing new artistic talent’ and ‘developing bold new work’. A community archive project was now about ‘ambitious creative exploration of heritage’. Cultural education leaders constantly have to be aware, and ahead, of the ideological game they are forced to play, as illustrated by one leader’s response to another strategic change, over a decade later:

“A key moment was when the Arts Council’s ‘Let’s Create’ strategy dropped. Suddenly, my phone didn’t stop ringing. Organisations that had been happy with their traditional audiences realised they had to widen access and do meaningful participatory work to keep their funding. It finally created space for the kind of disruptive, community-focused practice I’d been doing for years, giving it a bit of mainstream coverage.” – **Liza Vallance**

This constant dance – decoding the latest priority, mitigating the impact of devastating cuts, and spending creative energy on administrative survival – has been a reality of leadership for these leaders. It is an indicator of a system that has often failed to provide a stable framework to work within, requiring them to become expert navigators of its failures instead.

Future leaders should not, however, see in this narrative a blueprint for how things must be. Rather, the foreknowledge of the type of pressures, change and challenges that they may face provides a context within which they will develop their own responses, and continue to build a more equitable sector.

Tips for Leaders: What Does This Mean for You?

Can you identify any policy barriers that are stopping you from achieving your, or your organisation’s, aims?

What actions can you take to raise awareness or help the sector overcome these barriers:

- Work with other organisations to identify work-arounds or successes you’ve had in the face of these challenges
- Draft a letter or statement aimed at local representatives highlighting how these policies are negatively impacting the work achieved in communities.

Are there any policies that can benefit your organisation?

- Attend a local government surgery or Q&A session to learn more about policy changes. There may be opportunities (grants, funding pots, programmes, etc) that can support the work your organisation is already doing – or new areas of focus adjacent to your work where your skillset can help the government to meet their goals.

This article is part of A New Direction's Leading with Purpose: Cultural Education in Practice, a series exploring the evolution of cultural educational leadership, insights, observations, and practical tools. You can read them all here:
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