



'Don't level up or down - remove barriers'

A new cultural advocacy programme from Queen Mary University of London is making the case for change in cultural sector policymaking. **Molly McPhee** reports.



Unexpected Solutions in the Octagon, Queen Mary University of London.
Photo: Aimee Missen

Four young people stand before a crowd of policymakers, funders, artists, activists and academics gathered at Queen Mary University of London (QMUL) in the Octagon - the library of the People's Palace which was dedicated in 1887 to the provision of 'rational and instructive entertainment' to the people of East London.

It is October 2022, the first day of a week-long delay in Arts Council England's announcement of its 2023-2026 national portfolio. In this anxious state of suspension between over a century of investment in East End culture and the announcement of future critical funding lifelines, the young people take the mic. One by one, they begin a recitation of their recommendations for the future of arts and cultural policy.

"Arts and cultural workers should always be paid minimum wage."

"The sector should withdraw cultural activity for a week and build solidarity with other workers: teachers, nurses and rail workers."

"We should embed arts and cultural activity into policy overhauls in every part of life."

"We should adopt the Brazilian model of territory and ... establish value through longitudinal studies of access, rather than consumption."

These recommendations - and dozens more - were generated during the day-long arts and cultural policy summit: '[Unexpected Solutions: Inequalities, Policy and the Cultural Sector](#)'.

Sparked by the government's levelling up agenda and curated by Queen Mary's specialist Arts and Culture team which fosters strategic partnerships and research collaborations with the creative and cultural sectors, the conference brought together a wide range of sector professionals, researchers, students, journalists and government officials to consider what the sector can offer to effect critically needed policy change on local, national and international levels.

Reinterpreting cultural policy for the East End

The scope and approach of the conference was designed with QMUL's new Cultural Advocacy Fellows, "a group of 18 sector professionals drawn from union, funding, local authority, policy and arts backgrounds. The Cultural Advocacy Fellowship programme has been established jointly by [Queen Mary's Arts and Culture](#) and its public policy strategy unit [Mile End Institute](#) which researches the operation of British government.

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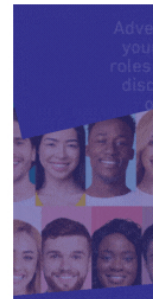
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Unexpected Solutions marked the launch of the programme, with fellows embarking on a unique three-year programme of work to generate new understandings about how public policy can be interpreted and refocused meaningfully to create positive change in the creative and cultural sectors. With a particular focus on the challenges facing the East End of London, the Cultural Advocacy Fellowship programme will respond to the acute political and economic pressures created in the wake of the government's levelling up agenda.

In the East End, as across the UK, it has become clear the proposed agenda of reducing gaps is entrenching stark inequalities. Interventionist action from central government to level up has resulted in an urgent need to make the case for the value of the cultural and creative sectors, as well as to articulate the material and rhetorical consequences of value-led investment in public services, particularly cultural investment.

Complex policy challenges

Over the next three years, the fellows will advocate for policy change across a number of areas, including lobbying government, publishing research and creating practice-based modes of advocacy. They will work with a range of academics to explore the questions and concerns that arise from their day-to-day working environments.

Just as the make-up of the group of fellows reflects the importance of multiple policy actors working together for reform, tackling these complex policy challenges cannot fall within the scope of a single academic discipline. Geography, history of social justice movements, cultural heritage, economics, law and engineering will be among the disciplinary fields harnessed to generate data and evidence to help fellows make the case for the arts.

Academics will create a space for the sector to think about the role and skills of advocacy and evaluation and bring together different forms of expertise in advocacy for the fellows to learn from one another. The Mile End Institute will link the fellows' work to wider policy debates at local and national government level. An indicator of where future areas of research will lie was developed at the Unexpected Solutions conference which coalesced around three lines of inquiry proposed by the fellows: Economics, Education and Future Cities.

Working groups

The Economics working group asked questions such as: What are the paradigms for how the economic value of the creative industries is measured, and what are the limitations of this approach? Does cultural infrastructure and provision serve local communities, or does it make inequality worse?

Concerns from the Education working group included how universities could develop more equitable approaches to working with the arts and culture sectors and how to advocate for the benefits of arts and cultural disciplines in HE given the widespread closure of music, drama and English departments across the UK.

The Future Cities working group discussed how city planners and developers take account of the creative and cultural sector in London. They explored various solutions and approaches using international case studies to thwart trends to price out artists and cultural workers from city housing.

Who are the fellows?

Among the cohort of fellows is a strong union representation articulating an overarching commitment to labour reform. There are also representatives from social justice advocacy offering decades of experience in catalysing change within organisations and policymaking circles in the third sector, as well as the major arts funding body Arts Council England.

The fellows also bring together vast expertise in the Higher and Further Education sectors committed to developing progressive and experimental postgraduate programmes, and community outreach. They have been involved in establishing cultural institutes that explore cultural policy and its impacts, both in the UK and Europe.

In addition, a significant number of the fellows have roots in local government, both in Tower Hamlets Council and in the Greater London Authority. They bring a critical focus on new approaches to city planning and placemaking.

A civic university and a cultural hub for East London

The Arts and Culture team is responsible for QMUL's status as a [Civic University priority area - a Cultural Hub for East London](#). Our commitment to this is reflected in the appointment of fellows with extensive policy and management experience in the East End. As a civic university, QMUL strives to advance public understanding of how universities can broker and facilitate coalitions across the sector, and to develop ways to meaningfully support them.

At the end of our October conference, insights were processed into recommendations

festival that is more reflective of the communities across the island.

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'Don't level up or down - remove barriers'

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Head of Culture and Placemaking
North West
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West Midlands
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LSO

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London
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the exchange

Deputy Director
London
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DANCE BASE

Chair of the Board
Not Specified / Other

National Centre for Writing

Chief Executive Officer
East
Salary: £62,000 - £68,000 (per annum)

National Theatre

Director and Chief Executive
London

THE CORONET THEATRE

Development Manager
London
Salary: £34,000 - £36,000 (per annum)

LIVE LOCAL

Community Engagement Officer (RHT)
Not Specified / Other
Salary: £25,874 - £25,874 (pro rata)

ORANGE TREE THEATRE
A member of the National Theatre

Development

At the end of our October conference, insights were coalesced into recommendations and performed verbatim by students and young people working with Queen Mary as peer researchers on a [partnership project with Spotlight Youth Arts and Arts Council England](#) and as [Assistant Producers](#).

The key message of the day, as one Spotlight creative youth work advocate declared was: "Don't level up or down. Remove barriers instead."

Dr Molly McPhee is Arts and Culture Manager at Queen Mary University of London.

[@qmularts](#) | [mcphee_molly](#)

To get involved and for more information, contact the [Arts and Culture team](#).

***QMUL Cultural Advocacy Fellows**

Munsur Ali, filmmaker and councillor for Portsoken ward, Tower Hamlets Council

Deborah Annetts, Chief Executive, Incorporated Society of Musicians

Kazi Ruksana Begum, Arts Development Officer, Tower Hamlets Council

Philippa Childs, Deputy General Secretary, BECTU

Niamh Dowling, Principal, Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts

Thorsten Dreyer, cultural policy and arts management consultant

Kim Evans OBE, arts consultant and trustee

Paul Fleming, General Secretary, Equity

Ruth Hogarth, Editor, Arts Professional

Justin Hunt, Combined Arts and Dance, Arts Council England

Richard Ings, London Area champion for Arts in Health, Wellbeing & Criminal Justice, Arts Council England

Kim Morrison, Head of Programmes, World Heart Beat Academy

Raja Moussaoui, Programme Manager, GLA

Simon Mundy, writer, cultural policy adviser and co-founder, Culture Action Europe

Naomi Pohl, General Secretary, Musicians' Union

Rachael Roe, Senior Policy Officer, GLA

Nicola Solomon, Chief Executive, Society of Authors

Deborah Williams, Executive Director, Creative Diversity Network

Link to Author(s): [Molly McPhee](#)

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