



## Local government and the arts revisited

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In *LGS* Vol 28 No 1, Clive Gray contributed an article, 'Local Government and the Arts' in which he looked at how and why the arts, at the time he was writing (2002), had achieved new importance within local government through the initiative of attaching arts issues to a range of other policy concerns. Here, he considers how the practice has developed since then, and is likely to develop in the future.

## Local government and the arts revisited

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### ABSTRACT

This article discusses policy developments in the arts and local government since the publication of the original article on this topic. It assesses the continued relevance of the thinking behind policy attachment in the original article for understanding and explaining policy in this sector, and indicates the direction in which the concept of policy attachment could be developed in both analytical and empirical ways.

**KEYWORDS** The arts; policy attachment; policy instrumentalisation; policy centrality

### Introduction

The original article on this subject made a number of both specific and general points: specifically it argued that the arts were treated as a subsidiary matter by the overwhelming majority of local authorities. A consequence of this was that people in the arts sector had developed a strategy of policy attachment where the arts became associated with policy matters that were quite distinct from the arts. This strategy was developed to

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provide the arts with a variety of supports that could be utilised to allow their own arts activities to be provided. These supports could vary from money to legitimacy and from political backing to policy justifications. The potential costs that could develop from this ranged from an instrumentalisation of the arts such that they were no longer concerned with their own policy interests but only with those of other sectors, to the risk that evidence to support such attachment was rather thin on the ground, and, without such evidence, there were consequently severe risks for the survival of the sector as a local government function in times of financial austerity. The general points were concerned with the status of the arts as a minority, because discretionary, policy sector and the consequences of this for how policy was made and, implicitly, whether the idea of policy attachment could be extended to other, similarly minor, policy sectors. Revisiting these arguments demonstrates that the conclusions drawn from them were correct and that these have been reinforced by developments since they were proposed. In addition, more recent empirical work on other policy sub-sectors within the general field of cultural policy has demonstrated that attachment affects more than simply the arts in local government and is likely to be a commonly employed, if not central, policy strategy for all minority policy sectors and sub-sectors.

### **Local government and the arts: policy developments**

Inevitably there have been major policy developments in the arts sector, as there have been in every policy sector in recent years. While some of these, including an increasing demand for financial austerity, have derived directly from outside of the arts sector (particularly as a result of the financial crash), others have developed from inside the sector itself. These developments have had clear implications for the general attachment argument, not least in requiring a clearer distinction to be drawn between an increasing exogenous instrumentalisation of the sector and a continuing endogenous attachment within it. The basic distinction that should now be drawn, and which was not made in the original article, is between a top-down instrumentalisation of the arts where demands are made by political actors from other policy sectors for the arts to become focused towards non-arts policy concerns (a point originally made by Vestheim 1994 and developed in Gray [2007, 2008] and Gibson 2008), and a bottom-up attachment of arts policy to policies which have been developed for other ends. In the former, the instrumentalisation of policy, the ends and objectives that arts policies are intended to fulfil are those of other actors. In the latter, the case of policy attachment, the ends and objectives remain those of arts actors but they are presented as if they conform to the interests of other actors and other ends and objectives. The major difference here is between means and ends with

instrumentalisation being concerned primarily with ends rather than means, and attachment being concerned with both means and ends and the relationships that exist between the two.

In some ways this distinction arises from policy processes that lead to the creation of the standard implementation gap between means and ends. In the case of attachment in the arts this gap is exploited by those within the arts sector to allow them to seek their own ends even if other policy actors have alternative ends to pursue. More recent work on the museums sector (Nisbett 2013; Gray 2014, 2015a, 2016) has shown that the control of implementation allows the policy intentions of outside actors to be manipulated in such a way that it appears that instrumentalisation has taken place even though it has not. Policy actors in these cases have adopted the language of policy intentions that derives from other sectors but this is not what drives the specific policy choices that they then make. This is still the case with arts policy in local government as well: in effect lip service is paid to what other sectors wish for or require but arts policy-makers still pursue their own ends, either as well as or instead of what these other sectors want. Thus, the social inclusion agenda of the Labour governments between 1997 and 2010 was consistently referred to as the justification for local authority arts activities (and remains so in many cases) even though it was the provision of the arts themselves that was more commonly the driver for policy initiatives and changes .

Attachment strategies can also be seen to underpin one of the larger structural initiatives in the field of local authority arts policy in recent years with the introduction of Trust status for a range of cultural policy activities (including not only the arts but also sports and museums in many cases – as is true in Glasgow, for example). The establishment of these Trusts has largely been for reasons of allowing cultural activities to benefit from a looser set of financial controls over their activities, particularly in being able to bid for funds from a range of sources that were previously unavailable to them for a variety of legal reasons. In effect, these new Trusts function as the equivalent of the arm's-length organisations that continue to dominate relationships between central government and the national arts field: local authorities provide general policy guidance and funding to them but they have to all intents and purposes an independent capacity to determine their own means to the fulfilment of these ends. While Trusts have grown in numbers, there are still relatively few of them in absolute terms. For the majority of local authorities, a more significant development has been through the impact of the National Lottery, particularly following the shift from capital to revenue funding, in providing the funding for short-term programmes of activity. This has opened the potential for attachment to take place with new bids being launched for funds that are designed to look as if they are meeting the diverse requirements of lottery allocators even though they are designed to

fund already existing activities on a continuing basis. While this means that there is a persistent need to produce new justifications for funding, the adoption of attachment strategies allows for the development of an extremely flexible approach to the bids that are being made to ensure that the essential money for service provision is obtained.

The attachment of local authority arts activities can be seen particularly clearly in the case of local economic development and regeneration strategies in recent years. These have often been based on the idea that cultural and arts activities are an effective means by which local economies can be improved and local areas can be enhanced. The major basis on which this approach has been developed can be found in the tourism and employment benefits that were claimed to be associated with Glasgow's experience as the European City of Culture in 1990 (Booth and Boyle 1993), which had a significant effect on changing the criteria by which this title was awarded away from 'culture' and towards economic development and regeneration.

This, however, was not the only example of culture as a motor of regeneration, equally as important have been the example of the 'Bilbao effect' (Sylvester 2009, 113–36), and the UNESCO and United Nations linkage of culture with ideas of sustainability and economic development. The former has led to the development of new cultural infrastructure with this being largely based on the idea of 'build it and they will come', quite regardless of the fact that the Bilbao Guggenheim was part of a much larger redevelopment strategy and it was this, rather than the new gallery by itself, that had a regenerative benefit for the local economy (Plaza 2008, 514) and is not simply transferable to other places anyway (Sylvester 2009, 135–6). The end result of this in the UK has seen some clear successes with new buildings (as with the Nottingham Contemporary) alongside some quite spectacular failures (the West Bromwich Public being the leading example). Despite this there is an accepted idea that culture and the arts are effective tools for regeneration and this has become a common justification for local authority investment in new infrastructure with this also becoming accepted around the world (see, for example, the international case studies in Grodach and Silver 2013). It has also become common for claims to be made about how effective culture and the arts are as regeneration strategies with consistent claims being made about the millions of pounds of contribution to local economies that arts and cultural events make (the local television news that I get, despite not living in the locality, has claimed the generation of over £30 million for the local economies of Birmingham and Coventry in the last month from the simple existence of a local festival, the hosting of an international cricket match, and the presence of a national ballet company in the region). Despite the major limitations of the studies on which these claims are based (Frey and Meier 2006; Seaman 2011) and their complete failure to estimate the opportunity costs of making arts and

cultural investments in the first place, it has become the accepted wisdom that the arts are economically worthwhile investing in, and arts practitioners have increasingly used this in an attachment fashion as a justification for continued support for their activities. The long tradition of this, as noted in the original article (Gray, 2002, 84–6), has led to it becoming a policy that does not actually require evidence to demonstrate its worth (Gray 2009) having established itself as an example of ritual rationality in policy terms (Roesing and Varkoy 2014), where policy rests on belief rather than evidence.

The role of UNESCO and the United Nations has been more important in policy terms in international contexts than it has been in the United Kingdom. Despite this, however, the commitment of these bodies to supporting culture has provided another justificatory plank for local authority arts policy to rest upon, particularly in the linkage that it provides between culture and ideas of sustainability. Given the currency that is attached to this in general policy terms the arts are able to feed off this linkage and claim that their role is an important, if not central one, for policy-makers to support. The endemic policy ambiguity that culture and the arts are associated with (Gray 2015b) means that it is possible to make claims about the role of the arts in supporting sustainability that are more or less impossible to either prove or disprove, thus providing a convenient label for policy actors to attach themselves to: it has political currency, it is ‘a good thing’ (in the Sellar & Yeatman ([1939], 1951, *passim*, sense), and provides both legitimacy and justification for policy initiatives.

### **Extending the argument**

While the original case concerning the attachment of arts policy to other sets of concerns within local authorities has not been changed by the passage of time – and has even been reinforced as a consequence of the policy developments that have taken place since the original article was published – the more general issues arising from the attachment argument also require consideration. The fact that the arts have always been a distinctly minority interest in local government was argued to open up the possibilities for it to be adaptive to environmental changes in ways that were not easily available for more strongly entrenched policy sectors such as education or social services. In these central policy sectors, attachment strategies were always likely to be of minimal concern because of the statutory nature of the services that they provide. For the arts, on the other hand, the need for support from a wider range of sources has been central to their continued delivery and attachment can be seen to be a core element of the policy approach that has been developed to allow this to take place.

The weaknesses that the arts sector has in terms of political centrality, ideological support and evidence of policy success have made it a largely peripheral sector with limited staff, limited funds and a dependence on the abilities of individual councillors and officers to argue the case for it. This makes it no different to the broader cultural policy sector that it forms a part of, with there being clear evidence that at the central government level this sector is simply not seen as being politically important (Gray and Wingfield 2011). While this places the arts in a position of dependence upon the good will of other policy actors, it also means that there is a great deal of freedom for the sector to develop individual approaches to policy which allow freedom for manoeuvre as the significance of arts activities is not seen as anything other an adjunct to what are perceived to be more important service commitments. In these circumstances, attachment is an effective way of navigating the complex currents of general local authority policy demands and expectations.

Extending this argument to other, equally minority, policy sectors and sub-sectors would serve to demonstrate whether the arts are simply *sui generis* in pursuing attachment strategies or whether it is a more common device that is also utilised elsewhere. The evidence from the museums sub-sector and cultural policy in general clearly indicates that attachment is also pursued there (Belfiore 2012; Gray 2008, 2011, 2014, 2015a, 2016), but further analysis of other policy arenas is required if the attachment idea is to be successfully extended further. It is possible, for example, to apply the attachment approach to minority policy interests within central policy sectors, such as education, to see both whether it can serve to make sense of how these minority examples operate, and whether it can be generalised as a strategy across policy sectors. As this updating of the original article demonstrates, amendments to clarify the meaning and scope of attachment strategies were possible and it would be anticipated that the application of the idea to other sectors would allow for further analytical development to take place.

## Conclusions

Developments within the arts in local government show that attachment is still a common approach in this area and, indeed, these developments have made it even more evident as a strategy in the field. The evidence demonstrates that attachment is still of continued relevance for understanding how and why the arts sector operates as it does in local government, particularly in the context of the continuing financial pressures over the last eight years that the sector has been confronted with. A generalisation of the attachment argument to other policy sectors and sub-sectors remains to be pursued although the limited application of it in other cultural policy arenas

demonstrates that it does have real analytical strength for explaining the ways in which minority policy interests and arenas can generate the supports that they require to allow them not only to survive but also to prosper.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

**Clive Gray** is Associate Professor in Cultural Policy at the Centre for Cultural Policy Studies, Warwick University. He has published widely on cultural policy and the state, researching cultural policy, and the politics of policy-making in the museums sector. His latest book is *The Politics of Museums* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

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