



Regional Cultural Research Network Scoping and Options Study

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The research brief was to identify the most appropriate option for the development of an integrated cultural research and data capability for the West Midlands region.

The fieldwork involved seeking the views of people who produced, purchased, or acted as brokers of cultural research in the region. Individuals with expertise and knowledge of cultural research and data collection in other regions were also interviewed.

Findings

The interviews identified many cases where good research had brought significant benefits to cultural organisations.

The results of the study reveal that the West Midlands shares the same challenges as other regions in relation to cultural research and data collection. However it is lagging well behind other regions in its response to these challenges.

Respondents within the region reported that they wanted an option that would build on the strengths and overcome the weaknesses of cultural research in the region.

The regional interviewees identified priority cultural research issues. They wanted:

- Better signposting of research and research expertise in region
- More sharing of research and more partnerships to share the costs of commissioning research
- Extension, connection and strengthening of existing largely informal cultural research networks
- A central point for advice, guidance and support for cultural research
- Clearer articulation of the concrete benefits that would flow from research and evaluation
- Case studies that demonstrate best practice in achieving policy goals through cultural intervention
- A forum dedicated to identifying research and data collection priorities, setting a regional cultural agenda and identifying funding for research
- Culture being mainstreamed and embedded in key strategies in such a way that its impact can be monitored

They were broadly supportive of options developed in other regions. These are:

- Developing a shared cultural research agenda
- Convening a regional cultural research group
- Running regular cultural research seminars and workshops
- Developing a regional cultural research reports database
- Compiling a regional researcher/consultant database to consult when commissioning cultural sector research
- Establish a 'cultural observatory' for the region, with a dedicated staff member(s)





Interviews held with experts in other regions with more developed approaches to cultural research identified a set of core drivers of progress towards integrated cultural research and data collection, these were:

- Support and agreement about the importance of culture from the highest level within regional development agencies, cultural consortiums and observatories
- Clear understanding of the roles, responsibilities and funding for cultural research within key regional agencies
- A mechanism for discussing and developing cultural research and setting a shared regional agenda
- A realistic approach to what can be achieved within budgets and timeframes
- Skilled people in key roles to support and develop research priorities

Conclusions

The West Midlands needs to consider issues around cross-sector, cross-agency and geographic integration when deciding on new approaches to cultural research. It should also acknowledge the prevailing regional attitudes towards cultural research and readiness of the cultural sector to work together collaboratively.

Recommended options

After considering the West Midlands expressed cultural research priorities and reflecting on the views and experience of experts in other parts of the UK, 11 options were considered. Each option was evaluated against its benefits, limitations, costs and the time needed to set up and deliver. Four options emerged as the most appropriate for the West Midlands. These require different lengths of time and resources. Options two and three are linked to option one and option four could be adopted independently of option one.

Option one – Convene a cultural research group. This is the most pressing requirement, which will provide the foundation for subsequent capacity building and partnership working. The prime benefit of this option is that it will provide the mechanism for bringing interested people together to shape a shared, improved and more integrated approach to cultural research and data collection. This is a relatively low cost option that can bring fairly rapid results. The group would have a remit to:

- Draw up a shared cultural research agenda, strategy and action plan
- Consider in more detail the feasibility of funding a set of specific research projects e.g. compiling a set of best practice case studies from across the sub-sectors
- Consider the value of recruiting a specialist research officer to support the cultural research group

Option two – Support a cultural research group by appointing a specialist cultural research officer with a remit to:

- Support the action plan attached to the cultural research strategy drawn up by the cultural research group
- Provide research support and provide guidance to those commissioning research
- Help improve the linkages between existing cultural research forums and networks in order to enhance integration across the sector
- Explore the potential for developing a cultural observatory appropriate to the needs and resources in the West Midlands

This is a more costly option that will take longer to realise. However it will provide much needed enhanced capacity and boost cultural research expertise in the region

Option three – Set up a specialist data task group linked to the cultural research group with a remit to:

- Build up the quantitative baseline using the DCMS Evidence Toolkit
- Define the data required to monitor the next Regional Cultural Strategy
- Explore the potential for data analysis techniques that can present the spatial dimension of cultural activity
- Discuss how local government performance management frameworks can contribute to monitoring the impact of cultural activity and investment
- Discuss the value of the cultural data collected via the Regional Lifestyle survey
- Discuss how cultural data could contribute to the research priorities and gap filling requirements noted in The State of the Region report
- Consider the potential of replicating the cultural overview posted on the south west regional observatory website
- Estimate the funding implications of the above

This is an option that could start to function in a fairly short time but its activities would need to be synchronised with the cultural research group.

Option four – Collate existing regional cultural research

The benefits of this option is that it provides :

- A central depository for regional research
- An overview of regional research highlighting key findings but also revealing gaps, duplication and data inconsistencies

This exercise could be taken independently of the cultural research group. The results of the exercise would bring fairly quick benefits to regional stakeholders. It is a fairly straightforward and not overly expensive “quick win” project.

It is recommended that these options should be complemented by a high level seminar designed to encourage key decision makers and potential research funders to think strategically about the importance of sustainable and policy focussed cultural research.

A copy of the full report is available at www.westmidlandslife.org.uk

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