

PUBLIC FORUM REPORT

vital signs: cultural indicators for Australia local and national approaches

13 March, 2014- Storey Hall Conference Room, RMIT University, Melbourne.

What to measure and how to measure it has been an ongoing challenge in the cultural sector. The *Vital Signs* public forum organized by Arts Victoria and the Cultural Development Network in March 2014 provided an opportunity for stakeholders to share information about the collection and use of cultural data. This formed part of national consultations on the *Vital Signs* paper on national cultural indicators. 85 representatives of local, state and federal government, artists and art organisations, consultants and researchers attended this event. The following report provides a summary of the presentations, and of successive group discussion. Details of resources about cultural data can be found on the complementary resource sheet.



presentations:

Judy Morton, Arts Victoria, *Manager Research:*

Arts Victoria's data collection activities.

Judy opened the discussion on cultural data by shedding light on the importance of measuring the arts. For Arts Victoria, this has been about: measuring the economic, cultural and social impact of the arts; monitoring trends in the Victorian arts and cultural sector; identifying and documenting outcomes of Arts Victoria programs; focusing on marketing and audience development and sharing information and supporting research in the arts/cultural sector. She described various Arts Victoria initiatives and research and shared brief findings from each. Judy then emphasised the importance of information sharing, directing participants to Arts Victoria's published cultural data on their Research and Resources page (www.arts.vic.gov.au/Research_and_Resources#.UyqMPK2SsrU). The details of available reports can be found on the attached *Vital Signs Forum Resource Sheet*. She concluded by stating that the greatest challenge for cultural indicators are to identify and collect data that are relevant, reliable, regular and timely.

Andrew Middleton, Director, National Centre, Culture and Recreation Statistics, ABS:

ABS' practices of data collection: current practices, challenges and future possibilities.

Andrew firstly identified key areas of cultural data covered by the ABS:

- ❖ **Arts** – visual arts, design, music, performance, reading, film, TV, radio etc.
- ❖ **Heritage** – museums, art galleries, libraries and archives
- ❖ **Natural heritage** – national parks, zoos, botanic gardens

He went on to identify current challenges in data collection processes, including: rapidly changing (government) priorities, tightening budgets, the nature of responsiveness, the question of what to measure and how to measure it, scale (national vs state vs regional), collection of administrative data, big data (e.g. transactional) and open data, data integration, internet and on-line data, and under coverage data.

Projecting future directions, Andrew spoke about the impact of the National Cultural Policy (2013), a possible iteration of the ABS' Satellite Accounts, identification of what data areas are important (*Vital Signs* consultations as part of this process), data integration processes (linking surveys/admin data to Census), data pooling, efforts to improve administrative data as part of the National Statistical Service and an increasingly collaborative landscape. He concluded by discussing some datasets that the ABS provides including *Cultural and creative activity by domain*, *Percentage of Gross Value* and *Attendance rates at selected cultural venues and events*. Specific survey titles and data sources are listed in the *Resource Sheet*.

**John Smithies, Director, Cultural Development Network:
*Local government data collection***

John commenced by introducing the National Local Government Cultural Forum established by CDN to increase local government's capacity to strengthen the arts and cultural development in their communities. He identified the role of cultural data in contributing to that capacity, and also in measuring its increase, as well as measuring strengthened arts and cultural development. John then spoke about a system being devised by CDN to capture data about arts and cultural projects run by local governments. The system will use an open source process so that councils can have access to the details and project workflow of projects run by similar councils. *Vital Signs* and other cultural indicators can be used as a way for councils to identify 'like' councils, and thereby projects with similar objectives.

Challenges and suggestions for proceeding included: identifying whether the indicators and frameworks suggested in *Vital Signs* are useful, making *Vital Signs* data searchable by Local Government Area and accessible by other systems, and ensuring that local government and national data are mutually compatible for researchers.

Q & A session. From left: John Smithies, Andrew Middleton & Judy Morton.



Judy Morton, Manager Research, Arts Victoria:
Returning to Vital Signs: Cultural Indicators for Australia: details of indicators.

Judy brought the focus back to the national consultations for the *Vital Signs* document, which was first released by the Cultural Ministers' Council Statistics Working Group as a draft set of indicators in 2010. *Vital Signs* is a set of high level cultural indicators designed to paint a comprehensive statistical picture of the value created by Australia's arts and cultural sectors. Indicators are both reflective of current practice and aspirational.

They are designed to assess whether the cultural sector is becoming more innovative, vibrant, strong, resilient and inclusive. They also prompt global thinking- whether we are reaching out to the world, or how we compare to other nations.

Judy outlined the three conceptual themes organising the indicators:

- 1) **1) Economic development** (the key dimensions of artistic production and consumption), eg. cultural employment (counts of people employed in cultural occupations and industries to show patterns of employment and forms of engagement in the sector)
- 2)
- 3) **2) Cultural value** (the intrinsic and instrumental values that the cultural sector delivers), eg. cultural identity (opportunities to experience and express ourselves as Australians)
- 4)
- 5) **3) Engagement and social impact** (the personal and public benefits that result from arts experiences) eg. access (access measures the provision of regional programs in arts and culture)

Questions around the need and nature of national cultural indicators were provided for the group discussions that followed. Attendees were also prompted to take part in the online *Vital Signs* survey and to continue advocacy for the value of arts and culture to Australian life.

Dr. Kim Dunphy, Research Program Manager, Cultural Development Network:
Forum participants' collection and use of data: summary of survey responses.



Not to be confused with the *Vital Signs* consultation survey, this presentation summarised the responses from attendees to a short pre-event survey. It was designed to capture current trends and challenges in cultural data collection and usage in forum attendees' organisations.

Survey responses showed that:

- ❖ more than half of the forum participants were from local government or an arts organisation, and used data in the planning and development of their activities
- ❖ the majority of external data currently used comes from ABS or Arts Victoria, followed by CIV (Community Indicators Victoria). AURIN, tourism research and Audience Atlas Australia, and research by Theatre Network Victoria) were mentioned but used less frequently. The majority of data collected internally by organisations related to audience experience or funding.

Key findings were that:

- ❖ data is used to inform programming, policy, operations and funding applications almost equally
- ❖ lack of time and expertise were key barriers to data collection, followed by lack of access to relevant datasets
- ❖ the majority of attendees would also like to use data which is currently inaccessible, such as social and economic impact measures, or have greater detail on local government arts spending

consultation / group discussions:

The following section summarises feedback from group discussions about the proposed *Vital Signs* framework.

1) Is the 3-themed framework - based on economic, cultural and social value – the most appropriate framework for organising the data?



- Generally the three themes were deemed acceptable
- One group found the framework lacking, proposing instead CIV's five established and comprehensive domains: Economic, Social, Cultural, Civic and Ecological.
- There was unanimous concern of an over-focus on economic indicators, and the fact that this domain is, inappropriately, currently positioned first / primary. Cultural value was thought to be the most important consideration for cultural activities.

2) Are the indicators identified in Vital Signs the most appropriate measures?

- The current framework has many indicators of outputs, but not of outcomes
- Cultural identity indicators should be broader than Australian identity, and also focus on indicators of cultural diversity
- Access: that indicators of access should include a range of access considerations, not only geographic (ie. regional) was echoed almost unanimously.
- Well-being indicator measures are missing
- Is government support a good indicator? Should support from private organisations, businesses and individual artists also be considered?
- Need indicators for in-kind support of the arts
- Voluntary work at the LGA level should be included
- Need qualitative indicators about significant changes
- It is important to measure non-ticketed, free events
- Need measures of non-cultural assets put to work as cultural assets
- An understanding of the relationships between indicators is needed
- No lead measures, only lag measures included
- Are these measures of *individual cultural capital* or the contribution that *culture makes to the society*?
- Longitudinal questions should be considered: what impact does participation have on people's lives in the long term?
- Innovation: is hard to measure, individual experiences, existing measures
- Is take up of tertiary arts education a good measure given access issues?
- No question of *why* certain arts or cultural initiatives should be undertaken
- How is demand stimulated? How do we measure demand for the arts?
- Need to be able to feed back to communities about how their cultural development is tracking.



3) How could these indicators be useful to you?

Informing policy and legislative framework

Planning

- Precinct structure planning
- Frame thinking in relation to our logic models for planning: what change are we seeking to achieve and then need data about that

Advocacy: Potential for advocacy

- Public has limited perception of value
- Education: advocating for real value
- Attracting more human capital to the arts

Benchmarking

- Benchmarking against our peers: lifecycle thinking
- Benchmarking cultural facilities

Informing practice

- Research, planning and development for best practice
- Informing cross-sectoral collaboration
- Consistent practices across the sector
- Understanding relationships between the indicators

Evaluation and reporting

- Encourage harmonisation of reporting framework across spheres of government
- Seeing / measuring change over time.

Next steps for the *Vital Signs* project

The Victorian forum was part of a national consultation process in all states and territories and a national survey. All input into the consultation will be considered by the Statistics Working Group at its next meeting in April. Arts Ministers, from all Commonwealth, State and Territory jurisdictions, will be presented with a proposal for an update of *Vital Signs* for their endorsement at their forthcoming meeting in Alice Springs in October this Year. Arts Victoria thanks all participants for their contributions to the project so far.

More information will be available on [Arts Victoria's website](#) as the project progresses. Contact Judy Morton, Manager Research, Arts Victoria, on judy.morton@dpc.vic.au.