

Misc

2nd Phase

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**CULTURE COMMISSION**

**A Response**

**By**

**The Poverty Alliance**

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## 1 Introduction

1.1 The Poverty Alliance welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Cultural Commissions development of a Cultural Bill of Rights and review of Scotland's Cultural Industries. The Poverty Alliance is the national anti-poverty network for Scotland and aims to tackle poverty by:

- Working with communities to help them combat poverty on their own behalf;
- Working with agencies to support them to work more effectively with communities and individuals experiencing poverty;
- Supporting the development of social policies that tackle social exclusion and combat poverty; and
- Promoting changes in public attitudes towards poverty and inequality.

1.2 The Poverty Alliance currently has over 100 ordinary and associate members and is financially supported by the Scottish Executive, Communities Scotland and number of Scottish local authorities. For further information about the activities of the Poverty Alliance please visit [www.povertyalliance.org](http://www.povertyalliance.org)

## 2. Images Project

2.1 In January 2004 the Poverty Alliance launched the Images Project in which 36 people (18 from Dumfries & Galloway and 18 from the Glasgow) took part in a ten week writing and photography workshop programme. In addition to learning and developing new skills the participants in the training sought to explore what poverty means to them from an urban (Glasgow) and rural (Dumfries & Galloway) perspective and to express this using the new skills they had acquired.

2.2 Groups were made up of able and disable bodied people from a wide range of life experience and age groups. **No Picnic**, a 3d art installation that toured Scotland and an online image library, were the fruits of their labour. Workshops, except for the Glasgow photography workshops that were provided by Streetlevel Photoworks, were facilitated by individual artists employed directly by the Alliance.

2.3 In order to develop a response for the Culture Commission, a focus group was held in Edinburgh with participants of the Images Project and other interested parties. We would like to thank the Commission for their support of this event and the Scottish Human Rights centre for their contribution. The group was asked seven key questions relating to the commissions consultation:

- (1) Should there be a bill of rights?
- (2) Do you feel you have access to a wide range of cultural activities?
- (3) What is stopping you taking part in cultural activity?
- (4) How can the barriers be overcome?
- (5) Should culture be a commodity?
- (6) Should responsibility for distributing funding for culture lie with Local Authorities?
- (7) Should culture be led in Scotland?

The answers to these questions has formed the basis for this response to the inquiry

### **3. Should there be a bill of rights?**

3.1 The session began with a presentation from Rosemarie McIlwhan, Director of the Scottish Human Rights Centre detailing what a bill of rights is, why it is important and how it can be used to protect and empower communities.

3.2 There was a unanimous response that there should be a Cultural Bill of Rights. The focus of the bill should be to protect and ensure access to culture for all with particular regard to the protection of the Scottish language, heritage and history.

3.3 It was felt that it was very difficult if not impossible to define 'culture' and any attempt to do so could lead to anomalies with under or no representation of some areas. There were also concerns about 'whose definition' of culture it would be. On this basis it was felt the Bill should not be descriptive but to act as an 'ideal' or 'statement of intent' forming the 'guiding principles' from which the policy and delivery of culture is based. It was felt this would also reduce any complications arising concerning responsibilities.

### **4. Do you feel you have access to a wide range of cultural activities?**

4.1 Again there was a unanimous response to this question of: *No*.

### **5. What is stopping you taking part in cultural activity?**

5.1 Again a unanimous response this time of: *Money*.

5.2 Transportation, particularly for those disabled and/or living in rural areas was also a major concern. Access is a significant barrier for disabled members of the group despite the recent Disability Discriminations Act. Improvements to buildings as a result of the bill were appreciated but generally the guidelines did not go far enough in providing genuine access. Problems of transport and access exacerbate and contribute to the financial barriers.

5.2 A lack of pride, awareness and low expectation of Scotland's own culture led to a lack of interest in culture generally.

5.3 Stereotyped attitudes and preconceptions both of the general public and by cultural practitioners also play a part. Preconceptions of certain 'high' cultural activities such as ballet or opera not 'being for you' or simply being something you wouldn't ever consider doing meant many were not benefiting from a broad cultural experience. Cultural snobbishness by some cultural professionals and certain sectors reinforced these attitudes and stereotypes.

### **6. How can the barriers be overcome?**

6.1 Financial barriers to taking part in cultural activities could be overcome by better subsidies to enable access such as free nights at cultural centres or a multi-ticket that could be purchased at a reasonable price, possibly based on a sliding scale, that would give you access to multiple cultural activities of your choice, theatre, music, film, sport etc.

6.2 Access issues need to address an improved public transportation system that is affordable and genuinely caters for the needs of wheelchair users. As well as funding available to subsidise specialised transport needs or to cover areas where there is no public

transport available. Genuine attempts by cultural buildings to provide access for wheelchair users.

6.3 Free local cultural nights featuring local talent would help increase an interest in local and Scottish culture benefiting from the ability to reflect local interests and needs. Local cultural officers supplying information on local cultural activities would also help generate an interest in local cultural activity.

6.4 Whilst it was appreciated that taking 'culture' in to schools, in terms of music lessons etc and by professional cultural organisations working in the schools, was a key way of breaking down barriers of attitude and perception all work carried out in schools needs to be complimented with support and education for the parents without which barriers broken down at school could well be rebuilt in the home.

6.5 There was little enthusiasm for developing the local school into a cultural centre, focus of the discussion was more about making what is already available accessible.

## **7. Should culture be a commodity?**

7.1 The main concern regarding this issue is that money would not then be available for project work, particularly community work. Any focus on cultural activity being financially profitable should not detract from or any way negate or restrict this type of cultural activity. Funding provision would still need to be in place to support work that was not going to be financially rewarding.

## **8. Should responsibility for distributing funding for culture lie with Local Authorities?**

8.1 There was a mixed response to this question. Some felt that this would be good as it would enable local areas to develop cultural activities relevant to that area and address the different needs of that local. Others had very serious concerns that LA's would not spend the money appropriately and that money 'ear marked' for cultural activities may well be used for something else. This also does not address national concerns.

8.2 A national 'over sight' body would need to be put in place to monitor cultural activity, LA's distribution of funds, administer national funding and national organisations.

## **9. Should culture be led in Scotland?**

9.1 Again a unanimous: no. Culture is perceived as something that exists and does not need to be created or led by an external body. It is something that should develop generically from the bottom up reflecting the needs and interests of the people of Scotland created by the people of Scotland.

9.2 Participants want the opportunity to construct and define culture themselves in way that reflects their lives and language - not be 'spoon fed'.

## 10. Conclusion

10.1 Access to a broad range of cultural activity is beneficial to the quality of life, health and enrichment of life to the citizens of Scotland helping to develop and empower the country and its people. A bill of rights would reflect Scotland's commitment to the importance of culture. In order to provide access to a rich cultural life there needs to be a greater financial investment in culture focusing on creating a structure that supports and facilitates the generic growth of that culture but does not describe or restrict what that culture is. There is a lot of interest, support and commitment to building culture in Scotland, particularly in terms of Scotland's heritage and history, what people and professional practitioners require is the opportunity to contribute - in the words of one of the participants of the Images Project.

*'...lack of opportunity is a factor of poverty. What this (Images) project showed was that when people do get the opportunity there's a lot of creativity in them and that's where the focus should be in the future on creating the opportunities for people who don't get it.'*  
*Dumfries, writing participant*

For further information contact:  
Rachel Jury  
Communications Development Officer  
Tel: 0141 353 0440  
[rachel.jury@povertyalliance.org](mailto:rachel.jury@povertyalliance.org)