



ARE YOU LISTENING?

An Evaluation of the Final Event of
the 'Portrait of a Nation' Programme

Executive Summary

Merseyside ACME
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Context

'The Portrait of a Nation' programme was a partnership initiative led and driven by Liverpool Culture Company and Heritage Lottery Fund, working in a team approach with 17 cities from across the United Kingdom, members of the Cultural Cities Network. The 17 cities shared responsibility with them for the process, which took place over two years and for its outcomes.

This programme encouraged over three thousand young people from across the United Kingdom to explore their heritage, roots and sense of identity, to transform their present and envision their future - through dance, drama, creative writing, photography, film making, installation art, making giant puppets, street art, composing and performing traditional, contemporary and urban music, curating images, digital art, storytelling and making work for the broadcast media, and in mixed media combinations of all of these art forms.

The project had two phases. In Phase 1, which took place throughout 2008, young people from the 17 participating cities in the UK engaged in locally developed arts and heritage projects designed to identify and explore what is special about where they come from, their local cultures and communities, as well as what they want to save, share and pass on for the future. In Phase 2, in December 2008, 220 of those young people came to Liverpool meet 90 young people from Liverpool to share what they had learned and created and to present their work to an audience of 2,810 members of the general public and adult decision-makers. The event was a major celebratory event within Liverpool's programme for its year as European Capital of Culture.

'Are You Listening' is a qualitative evaluation which focuses primarily on this Final Event, the second phase of the Portrait of a Nation programme and primarily on the immediate impact of the event on young people. It also refers briefly to young people's experience of Phase 1 of the programme and describes elements of the journey towards the Final Event. The evaluation prioritises the views of the young people themselves, but also draws on the views of adult observers, audience members, professional workers involved, the considerable practitioner expertise of the adult members of the evaluation team and the observations of members of the Youth Evaluation Team, a small group of young people who worked with ACME during the Final Event to interview and to administer e-questionnaires.

Wherever possible, the full evaluation report uses direct quotes from young people or adults working with those young people to express their views in their own terms.

Outcomes and Aims

To what extent did Phase 2 of Portrait of a Nation meet its desired outcomes for young people and contribute to the overall aims of the programme?

The desired outcomes of Phase 2 of the Portrait of a Nation programme for young people were as follows:

- Participants feel that a 'conversation' has been stimulated between young people which considers how we can take issues of identity and heritage forward into the future
- Participants gain insights into a large scale professional production process and learn new skills
- Participants feel proud of their contribution to Portrait of a Nation
- Participants feel part of the Capital of Culture programme
- Participants make meaningful and sustainable relationships with young people in other cities in UK
- Participants are inspired to continue their engagement with heritage, identity and culture themes
- Participants have a fantastic time in Liverpool

The overall aims of the Portrait of a Nation programme were as follows:

- Ensure that heritage is firmly on the cultural agenda, stimulate a genuine debate about heritage and identity, encourage young people to recognise heritage, roots, identity and culture as relevant and important for our future
- Create a vibrant celebration of what it means to be British, as seen through the eyes of young people
- Create a sustainable network of young people, partners and artists committed to ongoing collaboration and creative exchange
- Create an inspirational, memorable high profile event

The evaluation suggests that in Phase 1 of the project, many young people felt that they had learned more about the heritage of their cities and become more aware of how this heritage has impacted on their own lives. Of the young people who responded to our questionnaires and interviews on Day 1 of the Final Event, 97.8% felt that they had benefited from exploring and presenting aspects of their heritage, roots and identity through their city project. The ongoing work of the arts, cultural and educational organisations who worked with some of the young people should be acknowledged in the successful achievement of this outcome; Portrait of a Nation gave a welcome high-profile focus to these activities, but was not solely responsible for them. The Phase 2 Final Event also raised awareness of heritage in the minds of young people, adults working with young people and adult decision-makers, both during the event and through media coverage of it.

Although some young people undoubtedly benefited from the Final Event through meeting other cities and learning more about the heritage and lives of others, the evaluation finds that key opportunities for engaging young people in a 'conversation' about taking issues of identity and heritage into the future were lost. It suggests that this was partly because the programme for the event was too tightly packed, partly because more attention needed to be paid to structured opportunities to build engagement, conversation and dialogue between young people and partly because the chosen venues of St. George's Hall and Pontin's did not fully support informal social interchanges between young participants. We do not consider that the concept of a creative conversation was wrong, but that there were difficulties with its implementation. This could have been improved with higher quality facilitation and clearer linking of sessions on Day 2, better links between the informal social programme and the overall aims of the event and with a less tightly packed programme which would give young people more opportunity to talk to and learn from each other.

Most of the young participants who came to Liverpool for the Phase 2 Final Event had the experience either of setting up their exhibition spaces or of rehearsing their performances within the context of a large scale production process, and of interacting with a varied audience, in promenade style. Those who performed in the Final Event, 'Painting the Portrait' also developed their existing skills through creating/rehearsing/performing the music and choreography for the final performance. This was an intense process and will have given them insight into working

towards a large-scale collaborative piece in a very short period of time. Some aspects of the professional production process were criticised by those young people with more experience of performances; we support their criticisms and address them in our recommendations.

Many of the young people participating in this event were clear that what they valued about the society in which they live is its diversity and that this is what they saw being celebrated through Portrait of a Nation. They also wanted to celebrate their pride in their nation (e.g. Scotland, Wales), their cities, their ethnicity and their own creative individuality. The framework created by the Phase 2 Final Event enabled a vibrant celebration of all of these.

Participants felt very proud of their contribution to Portrait of a Nation; we would suggest that the positive way in which many of them participated in the final event was as much a contribution to this as was their creative work. Many of the young people also wanted to place on record their appreciation of the contribution of other young people. This sense of pride can also be attributed to the hard work of the adults from the participating cities who supported them during Portrait of a Nation and to the overall quality of professional production values provided by the Creative and Production Team.

During the final event, participants referred infrequently to being part of the Capital of Culture programme; we would suggest this was entirely healthy. Their immediate focus was on Portrait of a Nation and on their own city/group's contribution. We would suggest this aim is more likely to be achieved in the long term – that in coming years, many of the young people will refer back to having taken part in the Capital of Culture year in Liverpool. Distribution of photographs and the Final Event DVD will play an important part in achieving this aim.

It is too early to assess objectives relating to sustainable networks fully. However, as evaluators, we are concerned that the comments made by young people and adults about not having enough time or opportunity to interact with each other at the event may indicate that this will have a negative effect on long-term relationship-building. Some of the older young people who came to Liverpool have made friendships with young people from other cities in the UK and are intending to maintain these. A few connections have been made between arts/cultural organisations supporting young people and there are early indications that some exchanges may develop from these. Most of the

young people who participated in the final event in Liverpool (and many of the young people who participated in Phase 1 of the project) will continue with creative and cultural activities in their cities. One or two cities have indicated that they have plans in place to continue exploration of heritage themes; we would suggest this may be in those cities where strong links already existed or have been made through the project between heritage and cultural organisations.

We believe that unless a legacy plan for Portrait of a Nation is swiftly agreed and put in place, some of the potentially powerful connections made between arts/culture and heritage through the programme may be lost.

Our evaluation suggests that most of the young people who participated in the final event in Liverpool had a fantastic time for most of the time. A great deal of their feedback is positive. For example, when asked on Day 1 how they would score the event out of 10, 88.9% of the young people who answered our e-questionnaire scored it as between 8 and 10. For this, the adult staff and volunteers who worked on the event should be congratulated.

However, our evaluation identifies some elements of their experience which were not fantastic; adults had to work very hard to try to compensate for these elements and to support young people affected by them. These elements included: some disappointment with ways in which work was presented, disappointment in not being able to see more of each other's work, disappointment that 'conversation' sessions did not go deeper and last longer, difficulties with residential accommodation and need for more attention to be paid to the support needs of disabled and marginalised young people. We address all of these issues in our recommendations.

Recommendations

Although no definite commitments have been made, the possibility of repeating a programme like Portrait of a Nation in the future has been raised. Our ten recommendations are made with a large-scale programme with a final event in mind, but the questions they raise and attempt to address would also apply, in a modified fashion, to smaller-scale activities. They relate directly to issues raised by young people and/or the adults who supported them.

We are conscious that some of the recommendations would require additional resources above and beyond those which were available for the Portrait of a Nation programme. Some of these relate to encouraging and developing leadership in young people and could therefore attract the support of a funder whose major interest lies in this area. We believe additional resources need to be identified, or resources need to be reallocated, in order to fully achieve the aims to which Portrait of a Nation aspired.

We also strongly believe that the core administrative/production team in the 'host' city needs to be strengthened for an event on the scale of Portrait of a Nation, either by ensuring that some staff have a dedicated role in the project (rather than it being one of several projects in their portfolio) or by additional targeted part-time or free-lance support; the resources required for this would need to be identified by any city or organisation considering hosting such an event.

1: Duration of final event

If a final celebratory event of this level of ambition is envisaged for future programmes, we recommend that it takes place over a longer period of time, so that the opportunities it presents are made fully available to the young people participating and so that the pace is less frenetic for both young people and organisers. We suggest that a repeat of this particular event would require 6 days rather than 3 and set out our reasoning for this. This is likely to need substantial additional funding and likely to have to take place in school holidays. The alternative is to scale back the aims, design and content of such an event.

2: Young people in leadership roles

Large-scale events of this nature offer a range of opportunities for young people to develop their leadership skills; this can also improve the quality and effectiveness of the event. This happened on a small-scale in Portrait of a Nation, with young people invited to contribute to the overall design ideas for the event at a

one-off meeting at St. George's Hall and young people supporting our evaluation work. In a future event, we recommend that this aspect of the programme should be developed further. Feedback suggest that some of the young people who participated in Portrait of a Nation might be willing to act as the core of such a leadership group for a future event, drawing on their experience of the Liverpool event. Their work needs to be professionally co-ordinated and supported and this will have financial implications.

3: Appointment of Creative Learning Director

The assumption behind this recommendation is that one of the aims of future events of this nature will be that young people learn as much as possible from each other's experiences, from their own experience of the event and about the overall theme of the event. We believe that young people learn both formally and informally, so the role of the Creative Learning Director would consist of paying attention to both the formal structures for learning in such an event (including workshops, discussion sessions, contextualising and curating of performances/exhibitions) and of the informal structures for learning ('getting to know you' activities, the social programme, sight-seeing, website usage). The Creative Learning Director should also support the involvement of young people in leadership roles. His/her post should be at a level equal in responsibility and decision making to that of the Creative Director and Producer.

4: Links between young people before the final event

We recommend that any future event is designed in such a way as to make strong links between young people from different cities/regions before the final event commences, with a website that is managed more proactively and with face-to-face meetings between cities on an exchange basis. Other methods of establishing 'virtual' links with a twinned city – such as video letters – could also be explored. This would allow dialogue and sharing of different contexts and experiences to be established as a central theme at an early stage and might be one of the design criteria for Phase 1 projects.

5: Improved inclusion of young people requiring additional support in the final event

We recommend the establishment of a dedicated line in the budget for the Final Event to meet additional support requirements such as interpreters, attendance of a trained carer, signer, etc. Use of this allocation would need to

be agreed with participating cities at an early stage for planning purposes.

6: Supporting city partnerships

We recommend that the 'host' city or organisation designates one person to co-ordinate and develop liaison and communication with the cities; if the programme is to involve 17 cities, we would suggest this is a role which is likely to need a considerable allocation of days over the time of the project. We believe that the addition of a Creative Learning Director and of a dedicated role in the host city to support city partnerships would enable a much clearer focus on what we would call the 'learning journey' for all young people participating in the final event. We would stress, however, that this learning journey remains a shared responsibility for all those involved in the event.

7: Information dissemination at the event

A similar event should use regular assembly type briefings, asking young leaders to disseminate information. It could make more use of visual updates and visual reminders of the structure of the final event and purposes of each section. It could make more use of young participants as guides to the overall event not just the work of their own city.

8: Further development of internet-based communications

Because we believe that the website www.portraitofanation.net worked best for those cities whose project design for Phase 1 incorporated digital technology this might be considered as one of the design criteria for involvement in any future programme of this nature. We are aware that Heritage Lottery Fund offered training to adults from the participating cities working with young people; it may be that more attention also needs to be paid to training, expertise and on-line support for young people using the members' area of the website. We also recommend that the website is more proactively managed; this work could be contracted to a young people's digital group in one of the participating cities. Whilst there was an informal blogging station in use at the Phase 2 Final Event, there could have been more structured time included in the programme, for young people to utilise this potentially powerful tool to develop their understanding of the artistic works and conversations they were encountering. Further developments of a website of a similar nature (or this website) could include a welcome and introduction to the members' area giving a simple explanation of the purpose of the members' area of the site. A FAQ section and user friendly guide with suggestions for making the most of the website could also

improve the usability of its members' area.

9: A project contract between 'host' city and participating city

The style of creative direction of the Final Event for Portrait of a Nation was flexible and organic and this undoubtedly supported cities in crafting their individual responses to the overall theme and artists in designing a final event which 'emerged' from those responses. From an organisational point of view, however, we have noted the strong views of those city representatives who have asked for a slightly more structured framework in order to be able to ensure their young people could engage more fully and effectively with earlier 'cut off points' for conceptual and creative discussions. We have also noted the understandable frustration of staff in the 'host' city when responses to organisational requests were not forthcoming.

We recommend a more formal project contract between the 'host' city and participating cities: a clearer set of deadlines and pre-event meeting dates at the beginning of the project, a list of four or five 'deliverables' for participating cities and a requirement for cities to send a representative to a fixed number of planning meetings. Participating cities would have to accept that this would reduce their scope for flexibility somewhat but it should not affect their creative autonomy.

We also suggest that any dates which involve young people attending workshops or planning meetings need to be set as far ahead as possible, to enable participating cities to work out transport and other logistical requirements.

10: Legacy planning

In a project of this complexity and scale, we think it is difficult to plan fully for legacy whilst work is underway; key stakeholders, understandably, want to see what is successful and what is less successful and the time of key partners is fully taken up with making sure they can deliver what they have said they will deliver. However, we feel the next few months are critical in terms of building on the legacy of Portrait of a Nation, especially for the young people concerned. This is an issue which all partners need to address urgently.

Further Issues For Consideration

There are six other issues which we believe need to be taken into account in the design of future programmes.

1: Addressing tensions in project priorities

The aims of the Portrait of a Nation programme were both clearly expressed and reiterated frequently by the Creative Director, the production team and other key players. However, there were tensions in the interpretation and prioritising of those aims. We acknowledge that in any event of this scale and complexity (which also needs to meet the objectives of several different kinds of funders) there will be inevitable tensions in project priorities. We believe, however, it may be useful to discuss these potential tensions openly and honestly at the outset of any such project and agree on a set of guiding principles, which are then followed as closely as possible and referred to in any decision-making processes.

2: Making the most of large group planning meetings

We suggest that fewer large group planning meetings might be more productive, but that these should be obligatory for participating cities. There is value in considering whether one or two of these planning meetings should have a residential element; there is then an opportunity then for key adults to build relationships on a more informal level. This would carry an additional financial cost, but could support both the smooth running of the programme and more sustainable long-term partnerships. On single day meetings, there are always likely to be staggered arrivals and departures due to transport; we would suggest that the full group meeting should therefore be held between 12 and 2 with a working lunch and that the earlier morning and later afternoon are used for individual 'tutorial' type meetings where it is much easier for cities to discuss their individual concerns. We suggest that these larger meetings should not be chaired by a representative of a major funder of the project as we believe it requires a greater degree of neutrality in order to ensure that all views (including those of the funder) are fully heard.

3: Considering the spread in age range of participants

The Portrait of a Nation programme had a very wide age range of participants from primary school children to young adults; this depended on which age group each city had chosen to involve in their project. This did cause some challenges for the Final Event, in terms of age appropriate activities. In future planning, organisers might wish to consider whether or not to have a

narrower age band for participants.

4: Considering best ways to include of young people requiring additional support (event design issues)

We believe this issue needs to be considered carefully in the overall design of projects and a number of questions need to be addressed by organisers and partners. These include whether, for example, to specifically commission a group of young people with disabilities from one of the cities to lead a project across some of the cities or whether some art forms (such as radio) might be particularly useful to enable engagement and involvement of more marginalised groups. It also places additional practical responsibilities on the 'host' city/organisation and on the creative team/facilitation team to prepare in such a way as to fully support their involvement.

5: Applying learning from Liverpool to choice of venues

We suggest five questions which would be helpful to consider in choosing event and residential venues for future events of this kind relating to (1) assessing what might be required in the case of extreme weather conditions, (2) informal social spaces for young people to meet and interact, (3) a large additional space for rehearsals and assembly-type events, (4) ensuring there is enough time for the technical and production requirements of young people (some of whom may be inexperienced), and (5) considering whether signage is adequate.

6: Quality of finished product

This is a difficult and sensitive question which we also believe needs to be discussed openly at the beginning of projects of this nature; otherwise, there is a danger of setting young people up to believe they have somehow failed. If the level is to be set at that of 'work in progress' then much more attention needs to be paid to contextualising the work for audiences and for participants. If, on the other hand, the level is to be set at 'the best work that young people in our city can produce', this needs to be designed and resourced accordingly and may require a degree of pre-event selection.

The Impact of Portrait of a Nation on Young People

What else did we learn about the impact of Portrait of the Nation on young people?

Because our evaluation prioritised the views and comments of young people (self-reported or reported through adults working closely with them), we have gathered information which is not directly related to specific aims and outcomes, but may be generally useful in reflecting on the impact of the programme and in planning for the future.

Approximately half of the young people who completed our pre-event questionnaire saw their increasingly positive sense of identity (often described as a sense of pride in their city or region) as the most important thing other young people could learn from them at the Liverpool event. There was also a strong view that learning about and presenting heritage was a way of challenging irritating and limiting stereotypes and perceptions about their cities.

Pre-event questionnaires also suggest that most of the young people had little or no knowledge of the heritage of the other cities participating in the final event in Liverpool; the knowledge they did have was limited, often to the very stereotyped images young people from those other cities were anxious to dispel.

Other young people had issues which were just as high on their list of priorities in terms of expression and communication. Foremost amongst these were a desire to challenge the way the media and many adults stereotype young people and a desire to promote a contemporary sense of their identity/culture.

Young people had clearly enjoyed the opportunity Portrait of a Nation had offered them to develop their creative and artistic skills. They also wanted to make new social connections with other young people, to learn and extend themselves through participating in the Final Event, and to reach out to communicate their messages effectively to others.

Thanks

We would like to thank the many individuals and organisations who supported us in our work as evaluators; all those who took the time, in pressurised circumstances, to respond to our requests for information and opinions. We want to especially thank Harriet Brignall, Tom Cain, Andrea Howard, Sophia Hussain, Caitlin Osborne, and Chelsea Rutherford, the Youth Evaluation Team. This was a small group of young people drawn from across the participating cities, who worked with us during the Final Event to ensure that the voices of other young people were heard. They interviewed other young people, administered questionnaires and observed workshops, performances and exhibitions. Thanks also to Ben Booth and Sara Wilson, who helped us with some interviews.

Our only hope is that the full report, this Executive Summary and the summary written specifically for young people does adequate justice to the varied experiences of the young people who participated in this initiative.

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