

Overview

The agenda for this meeting, including the objectives, can be found in the attached annex. The first session focused on information sharing and the second included discussions on the British Council's reach within the UK and the implications of the economic downturn. The meeting consisted of a fairly small group, see attached annex, with a number of members unavailable. The sessions were however informative and stimulating.

Information sharing

Members provided updates both on their recent interactions with the British Council and on developments within their areas of relevance to the British Council. Where there had been contact with the British Council overseas, members emphasised how valuable the local knowledge and expertise had been in the successful delivery and sustainability of programmes. The British Council was in a unique position as it was trusted both by British and by local partners. Within the UK one member sensed some unease about the pace of change and wondered how committed teams were to the overall strategy.

An update was provided by the new Director of Arts who confirmed that there will be an Arts Advisory Group in the New Year which will serve a similar function to the other advisory groups. She summarised developments over the last 12/18 months and the action that has been taken to resolve a number of challenging issues. She summarised for example how our internal processes for commissioning new projects had resulted indirectly in a drop in the amount of arts work being carried out globally and how that issue has now been resolved through internal compromise. She referred to two major global initiatives in the Arts, International Cultural Leadership and Creative Entrepreneurs. She also indicated that there had been an endorsement of the British Council's role to promote the UK through the Arts and emphasised the crucial importance of the British Council retaining local expertise in the Arts.

Discussions

The first discussion focused on a piece of work that had been done to clarify where the British Council was working in the UK i.e where our partners were based. There was a suggestion that the picture provided by this work will be complemented by data from the internationalisation index, showing how 'international' different parts of the UK are.

Members saw the immediate value of this work as a tool for understanding the current picture but highlighted that the British Council needed to be clear about how it might use this data. There was a query around whether the British Council intended to use this data in a strategic way in relation for example to resource allocation decisions.

A number of other points emerged including:

- We might develop the picture further with appropriate weighting techniques to measure our impact in the UK.
- The British Council could use the data to stimulate links between organisations in the UK that shared common interests.
- It would be helpful to complement the work with some qualitative research
- We need to think through what we are aiming for in terms of representing the diversity of the UK – does this need to be purely geographical with an even spread across the UK?
- It is important that the British Council is able to argue in favour of 'internationalism' – we need to make the case for it and be clear too about what we as an organisation can offer to complement what is already happening.

The second discussion focused on the global economy and the implications that might have for the British Council with the likelihood of a squeeze on public expenditure.

Members emphasised the need for the British Council to retain a long term view and 'hold its nerve' in the face of this crisis, whilst reviewing its priorities in this rapidly changing environment. The British Council should be wary of focusing solely on levels of delivery and retain a focus on the key areas of cultural relations.

There will be an increasing need to re-think *how* we do things and we should be looking to lead the way in using technology to stimulate international co-operation and help develop dialogue and understanding. There will be a growing need to identify and demonstrate efficiencies and there would be value in scenario planning.

It is probable that there will be less money available from donors and foundations as well as from the corporate sector and Government. In this climate the British Council will need to become skilled at developing appropriate partnerships that fulfil its own objectives as well as those of other organisations. The prevailing economic climate might prompt more organisations to share financial responsibility for projects and develop partnerships.

In the current global crisis the British Council may have a role to keep open cultural links with those countries worst hit. If students stop travelling from particular countries the British Council should consider stepping in to maintain at least a minimum level of ongoing educational and cultural co-operation until the economic situation improves.

In the current international environment, with high levels of conflict and the risk of protectionism, there is a growing need for the kind of dialogue and understanding that the British Council can stimulate. However, the British Council needs to be adept at making this case and it is important that the staff themselves believe it. The strategy of the organisation should not be about survival or expansion but should be a reflection of what we truly believe as an organisation. There may be issues around the ethos of the organisation and the extent to which we are commercially driven or motivated instead by other more public spirited motives.

There was an endorsement of the Council's work in the area of Climate Change and a sense that it could increasingly draw on its global networks to identify cultural differences in attitudes towards Climate Change.

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