

Artistic Enterprise

A discussion document by Pete Marchetto

Many of those who have been successful in the cultural industries have devoted time on benefits to the development and promotion of their art. This activity continues within a system increasingly hostile to such initiatives. This document proposes a scheme, funded with lottery money, to legitimise the enterprise of many emerging artists on benefits.

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1. Introduction

An official in charge of urban regeneration in the north of England was once asked why he allowed artists to use derelict buildings under his jurisdiction. He replied that when artists moved into such a building they would whitewash the walls, plug up leaks, get the electricity and plumbing working and generally make the buildings habitable again free of charge... after which he could move the artists out and let the building to someone else.

At a recent symposium where this document was discussed, one of the delegates told the story of a friend who had been at a function attended by Margaret Thatcher, then Prime Minister. Mrs. Thatcher asked him what he did for a living and he replied he was an artist. She smiled. 'I think you artists are wonderful,' she said. 'The government gives you money and you create beautiful things. Then the government stops giving you money... and you *still* create beautiful things.'

Then there's the story told of a record company executive complaining to a then Conservative minister that government failed to recognise his very lucrative industry in grants and support. Hearing the complaint, a journalist present remarked that the vast majority of the industry's future stars were being supported directly by government; they were on the dole.

The journalist might have broadened his argument to include aspiring actors, writers, artists, film directors, video makers and others involved in the cultural industries. Many of today's stars of stage, screen, radio and compact disc have used the benefits system as an unofficial source of funding for artistic enterprise, spending their time working diligently to further their art. Within the rules of the benefits system they have been guilty of fraud, and yet the result of their fraud is widely acclaimed success and praise for initiative.

In a nation that takes pride - and considerable financial benefit - in its cultural contribution to the world and its support of personal endeavour, that such activity should be classed as fraudulent is clearly unacceptable. Fortunately such personal initiatives can be easily legitimised within the benefits system through a simple 'back to work' scheme; a scheme, furthermore, which may be funded by lottery money that exists to support artistic enterprise.

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2. The Present Situation

Within the current rules of the *Job Seekers' Allowance* there is no license for claimants pursuing careers in the arts. At best, they are permitted 16 hours per week in pursuit of any artistic project and this on the understanding that they are to apply for 'real' work at the same time.

For a band wishing to rehearse or a small theatre company developing a production to performance level, this rule presents considerable difficulties. Further, any money that may be earned through an artistic project is made troublesome to declare. For example, actors paid a token £50 for touring a semi-professional theatre production would be admitting to having spent that period 'unavailable for work' and leave themselves open to investigation for the weeks preceding the tour, undoubtedly spent in rehearsals. In addition, the benefits system as it stands finds it difficult to deal with such small, sporadic payments; declaration of them can lead to a period of confusion and a temporary withholding of benefits - a delay the claimant can ill-afford - while entitlements are assessed. A further threat to such a theatre company would be one of its cast being selected for a compulsory period on a scheme such as *Job Club*. This will usually be enough to end entire production and effectively 'de-skills' the person selected and everyone else involved with the project.

To the aspiring artist it can sometimes seem that the benefits system has been intentionally designed to thwart artistic endeavour. What, then, are the options open to the budding artist who needs time to develop a talent, skill or new work but who would need, in the meantime, to eat?

2.1 *Benefit schemes*

Amongst the plethora of benefit schemes designed to encourage personal enterprise there is nothing suited to the artist. *Enterprise Rehearsal* may be of value in some limited instances, but this allows a mere 13 weeks to develop a project and is clearly focused, both in its intentions and training, on those initiatives the benefits system has traditionally recognised as 'real work'. It is also run on the understanding that the participant is aiming to be permanently employed at the end of that period. It fails to reflect the realities of those emerging within the cultural industries.

2.2 *Lottery funding*

It might be argued that the benefits system is not the place for aspiring artists; they should be applying for lottery funding. However, even this source of finance fails to recognise that artistic enterprise is often solitary and that artists need to survive while producing new work.

The recent *Arts For Everyone Express* grants allowed for applications for up to £5,000; this might have allowed an artist the opportunity to develop new work and skills. However, applications were limited to

groups - individuals were unable to apply - and 'staff costs', (personal wage payments), were limited to 20% of any grant made. Further, any enterprise so funded was not to be run for profit and needed to be targeted on the community as a whole. No scope here, then, for the writer or sculptor; only for the charitably run small press or gallery who might service them. The scheme validated arts services but failed to validate the arts themselves.

2.3 Arts Council funding

An aspiring novelist who has been rejected for *Enterprise Rehearsal* and failed to qualify for an A4E grant might have a chance with an Arts Council literature award. However, according to the list of grant allocations 1997/98 in the *Arts Council News*, (February 1997), most of the money set aside for literature is allocated to regularly funded organisations - services for writers rather than funding for writers themselves. The only suitable category for application - penultimate in a list of 36 - is that of *Writers Awards*. Nationally, the total allocated for these awards is a mere £124,000.

Artists in other fields face similar disappointment. Once again, cultural service industries are catered for; the artists who utilise their services are not.

2.4 Funding arts - funding artists?

Arts funding in Britain seems to have forgotten the artists themselves. Grants and awards are targeted almost exclusively at the service end of the cultural industries. It's as if a farmer were to attend to every detail of his farm up to the ploughing of the land then refuse to plant any seed, hoping the harvest might appear of its own accord. A new gallery may be funded, but the emerging artists whose work it displays will not. A small theatre company may be funded for a new production, but that funding will not extend to paying the actors enough even to survive the duration of the project.

That art exists at all in this country is often testament to fraud as artists in all fields sign on fearful of detection and prosecution or a premature end to their enterprise with their placement on an inappropriate scheme. This is clearly a loss to the nation's wealth of talent and initiative. Fortunately, some survive the trials of the benefits system. Among the familiar faces on *Top of the Pops*, in popular serials or receiving praise on the news for a gallery showing their work abroad you will see yesterday's frauds, today's popular stars and cultural exports. That they have survived to thrive in the cultural industries is evidence of good fortune in a hostile environment. Others not so fortunate have failed to survive, their skill and talent lost. Developing artistic enterprise in Britain is in itself a lottery and results in considerable loss not only to the individuals affected, but also to the nation as a whole. This is clearly an undesirable situation.

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3. Supporting Artistic Enterprise

Individual artistic enterprise may be developed through a benefits scheme - funded at least in part by lottery money - providing artists without other means of support with subsistence level payments, (benefits plus ten pounds a week), while they pursue artistic projects. Money earned from these projects would be deducted from any further *Artistic Enterprise Scheme* payments in accordance with earnings rules for other benefits. It may also be valuable to support recipients in marketing themselves and their work.

3.1 Why run the scheme within the benefits system?

As previously discussed, many of those able to benefit from the *Artistic Enterprise Scheme* are at present claiming under the *Job Seeker's Allowance*. More importantly, the prime criterion of eligibility for the *Artistic Enterprise Scheme* would be the recipient having no other means of support; benefits offices are the obvious place of contact.

Within the benefits system as it stands exist necessary mechanisms for the detection and prosecution of abuse, such as failure to declare earnings.

Further, failure to prove eligibility for the *Artistic Enterprise Scheme* - given that the prospective claimant is without other means of support - would lead to a claim for some other benefit which could then be dealt with 'in house'. Conversely, those claiming other benefits could be pointed in the direction of the *Artistic Enterprise Scheme* at any initial claimant interview.

To run the *Artistic Enterprise Scheme* through the Arts Council or directly through lottery allocations would lead to expensive re-organisation and disruption to both systems in setting up a new level of administration mimicking that which the benefits system already has in place. In most respects the *Artistic Enterprise Scheme* parallels other benefits schemes and so may be easily incorporated within the benefits system.

3.2 Why fund the scheme through the lottery?

Funding the *Artistic Enterprise Scheme's* administration and payments is a valid use of lottery money allocated to the arts. The advantages are obvious in savings of treasury expenditure in supporting individuals who would otherwise be claiming under the *Job Seeker's Allowance*. Housing benefit would continue to be paid through local government as with other such 'back to work' schemes. Dependent upon take-up for the *Artistic Enterprise Scheme*, lottery money would either fund the scheme in its entirety or on the basis of fixed allocation.

3.3 How much would scheme participants receive?

In common with other 'back to work' schemes, the *Artistic Enterprise Scheme* would pay recipients the standard amount of benefit with an additional ten pounds per week. Any additional income earned by any recipient - through the artistic project or projects being funded or through other sources - would lead to deductions in payments from the *Artistic Enterprise Scheme* on the same basis as other benefit and benefit scheme payments. To facilitate such deductions, however, it is necessary that the assessment system be set up to deal quickly with the small, sporadic payments which emerging artists tend to earn.

3.4 What would be the eligibility criteria?

There should be no requirement for an initial period on other benefits prior to an individual being eligible for the *Artistic Enterprise Scheme*; any prospective applicant so restricted would be forced either to apply for employment unsuited to their skills or to commit fraud as at present by working on artistic projects under the *Job Seeker's Allowance* for the duration of this initial period. As for *Job Seeker's Allowance*, the claimant should be able to demonstrate that he or she has no other source of income or means of support.

It should not be necessary for the claimant to show previous experience in the field; after all, for every actor there's a first rôle; for every artist a first painting; for every writer a first story. Indeed, it would be useful if claimants for benefits were encouraged to see pursuit of the arts as a valid route into employment and, where appropriate, join the *Artistic Enterprise Scheme* rather than claim *Job Seeker's Allowance*.

Eligibility criteria would, of necessity, vary from field to field within the arts. For example, an actor not involved in a production might be eligible to three months on the *Artistic Enterprise Scheme* while attending auditions; a review at the end of that period would assess the number of auditions attended before a decision is made as to whether the *Artistic Enterprise Scheme* can continue to benefit the claimant with a three month extension. An actor who has been cast in a production would be eligible for the duration of that production and perhaps a further three months to audition for further rôles. A writer would have to demonstrate an idea for a new work or works and be allowed a period on the *Artistic Enterprise Scheme* suitable for completion. An artist might be expected to show preliminary sketches of new works. Those involved in higher capital projects - such as a film production - might be accepted on to the scheme while seeking arts or private sector funding. For most applicants it should be possible to assess eligibility by such strict criteria; however, an element of flexibility would be necessary to take account of more esoteric initiatives.

The central criterion, then, is that new artistic work will be, or is likely to be produced as a result of that funding. Participants on the *Artistic Enterprise Scheme* unable to show themselves active in production or preparation of such work will forfeit their place on the scheme.

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3.5 What safeguards would there be against abuse of the scheme?

Applicants should have their projects assessed for their suitability along guidelines laid down as at present by the *Arts Council*.

The applicant should state that he or she has the necessary equipment to undertake the project. Regular checks would be conducted to ensure that this criterion is fulfilled and that there is indeed work in progress. Where possible this should be done at the benefits office, though there will be occasions when checks would involve the assessor in some travel; to ensure that a play is indeed in production, for example. Applicants should state that relevant premises such as rehearsal rooms and studios would be open to such assessment and ensure that the arrangement is acceptable to others involved in the project.

3.6 What administration would be required for the scheme?

Administration of the *Artistic Enterprise Scheme* may be made commensurate with other 'back to work' schemes currently in place. This may include a brief compulsory course on taxation, marketing, fund raising and accounting oriented towards the cultural industries; some printed information on matters relevant to the applicant, (such as preparation and presentation of manuscripts); and, as described above, a procedure for assessment while funding is ongoing.

At relatively little extra cost but with considerable enhancement to the *Artistic Enterprise Scheme*, databases might be set up with information on local theatre groups, small presses, galleries and so on. This may be extended to include listings of educational courses catering for those in the arts and may even extend to applicants undertaking to allow their own personal details to appear on the database for access by those wishing to employ their skills.

In its simplest form, the *Artistic Enterprise Scheme* should prove no more expensive than any other to administrate. However, given the considerable advantages that may accrue from it and the relatively minor additional cost, the database option should be given serious consideration.

4. Political Advantages of the *Artistic Enterprise Scheme*

The advantages of the *Artistic Enterprise Scheme* are obvious from the point of view of emerging artists. Those living on benefits while producing new work want no more than to be allowed to get on with it. To be legitimised within a benefits system increasingly hostile to their activities through its mounting stringency would be more than enough to satisfy them without any additional expenditure to make the *Artistic Enterprise Scheme* more alluring. Unusually for so popular an initiative, however, the *Artistic Enterprise Scheme* is also attractive from a political viewpoint for a number of reasons.

4.1 Saving the treasury money

Funding *Artistic Enterprise Scheme* payments and administration through the lottery - as has already been mentioned - is a legitimate use for finance raised for the arts. It is difficult to assess how many people currently claim benefits while pursuing artistic projects - committing what is technically a fraud they do not publicise their activities - but the number must be in the tens of thousands. These people would be removed in part or wholly from the benefits system in terms of treasury payments.

4.2 Cutting unemployment

By doing no more than legitimising what is in any case their legitimate work creation, those on the *Artistic Enterprise Scheme* would cease to appear in the unemployment statistics. As artists claiming benefits continually remind one another, they are not unemployed; they work hard and show considerable enterprise, skill and initiative in so doing.

Further, those who succeed in the cultural industries create new employment both for themselves and for those who service their work. New artists are new businesses.

4.3 A popular scheme

It is difficult to assess the number of people who would participate in the *Artistic Enterprise Scheme* but there can be little doubt in the minds of those familiar with emerging artists that take-up will be high and the participants enthusiastic - unusual for any scheme designed to take people off the unemployment register.

4.4 High profile success

Success in the arts is high profile success spanning all media and interests, from a new face in a popular television serial to a new composer commissioned by *Radio 3*. Those who attain such success while on the *Artistic Enterprise Scheme* will be, by their nature, newsworthy.

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Conservatively estimating that participants on the *Artistic Enterprise Scheme* will number in the few tens of thousands and assuming even only a small percentage of them will be successful in the first year of the scheme's operation, the media-friendly success stories in that first year would still number in their hundreds. High profile success - thanks to government initiative.

4.5 Cultural resurgence

With more and more media outlets and increased leisure time globally, the cultural industries are among few still expanding. Over the past two decades, Australia has made itself increasingly felt in its exportation of culture in all fields. This is largely due to the work of the *Australia Council*, a body set up in 1975 to provide grants in support of new artistic enterprise. While the Australian approach is expensive compared to the *Artistic Enterprise Scheme* it provides a valuable lesson as yet unlearned in Britain; give artists enough to eat, leave them alone to get on with it and the economy will thank you. The nation would not only save under the *Artistic Enterprise Scheme*; it would thrive.

5. Conclusion

It often seems to the emerging British artist that the nation's culture survives not thanks to, but in spite of the very bodies set up to support it - and in spite of government itself. Few artists succeed without years of unpaid dedication to their art but, through those years, the artist has to eat. Without funding, many artists find themselves on benefits, attempting to pursue their art in a climate increasingly hostile to their activities.

The best way the government can support the future - near and far - of the arts in Britain is by acknowledging and legitimising the activities of its emerging artists. By so doing it allows benefit level payments to be made to a large number of people through lottery money instead of treasury funding as happens at present.

The *Artistic Enterprise Scheme* would be popular with its participants and those who succeed would provide high-profile testament to the initiative of the government in all cultural fields, from the popular to the esoteric.

With increasing numbers of media outlets and increasing leisure time globally, the cultural industries are among the few still expanding; they cannot be ignored in their contribution to the health - and wealth - of the nation. The *Artistic Enterprise Scheme* will do more to support those industries than any other arts funding or government initiative by supporting those industries' most fundamental asset; the nation's emerging artists.

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