

# Friends with benefits

\_\_\_\_\_ The similarities between the arts and the voluntary sector are greater than the differences says **Gareth Hart** – it's time both worked better together

A while ago I attended a meeting where the key speaker was Dame Suzi Leather, Chair of the Charity Commission. Whilst she was eloquent and thought-provoking, what I found most fascinating was that there were senior members of the arts sector in the same room as top managers from the voluntary sector. This seemed unusual and it got me thinking about the differences between the two worlds and how, in this age of austerity and public sector cuts, bringing them closer together could be of great mutual benefit.

My experience in Cornwall is that whilst arts and voluntary groups engage at project level in many ways, for example the work of Arts for Health, St Petroc's Society and the Real Ideas Organisation, there seems to be a lack of

higher-level and strategic joint working. This divide has historical roots and exploring it would be a research project in its own right. Sir John Tusa, Chair of the Clore Leadership programme, in his Hinton lecture last year, called the gulf a "gap of comprehension" and summed up the relationship as "not yet firm friends, perhaps distant second cousins".

In what is surely a simple issue of designation, arts organisations are not specifically named as part of the wider 'civil society' in the National Council for Voluntary Organisation's UK Civil Society Almanac 2010. We can get into endless arguments about definition. Even the term 'voluntary sector' could be taken to include arts organisations, since many are run by unpaid trustees and engage volunteers. The arts are certainly under-represented in many of the voluntary sector's strategic partnerships. At these higher levels of policy making and political influence there are great gains to be made by organisations working more closely together: creating a larger body to lobby the public sector, the ability to argue collectively for joint causes, and developing ways to share good practice on issues such as governance, management and funding.

In the middle ground are great opportunities for arts organisations to provide expertise or even sell services to the voluntary sector such as box office, event management, design, marketing and promotion. The relationship does not need to be purely commercial; philosophical, social and ethical motives could drive partnerships. As Tusa hints, we could create a "new space between capitalism and the state where the best things in life take place". I think Tusa is right on this last point but his description of us as "distant cousins" may be less accurate. For me the similarities of the sectors are greater than the differences between them. A few small steps could bring the two worlds together to form an inspirational association with the ability to influence and create positive social and cultural change. With greater pressure on budgets it seems more important than ever to make friends and influence people.

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