



Visual Arts South West

A report about strategic communications and advocacy

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Prepared by

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Image: Fathom, Simon Faithfull at The Exchange Penzance

Contents

SECTION 1 – INSIGHTS

1.1 Introduction	03
1.2 Issues facing the sector in the region	03
1.3 Analysis of current VASW communications & advocacy	04
1.4 Findings from consults, workshops & surveys	05

SECTION 2 – SHARPENING FOCUS

2.1 Values	07
2.2 Audience / stakeholder profiles	10

SECTION 3 – TOWARDS A NARRATIVE

3.1 Strategic communications & advocacy	14
3.2 First draft overarching narrative	14
3.3 Key messages	15
3.4 Timeline	15

Note: This report will be supplemented with some useful tools and templates.

Section I – Insights

I.1 INTRODUCTION

Visual Arts South West (VASW) commissioned Palmer Squared to deliver a Strategic Communications and Advocacy Plan for the next phase of the network focusing on needs, gaps and priorities.

This Plan has been developed following desk research and consultation with representatives from the visual arts sector across the South West including artists, funders, venues, and non-venue-based arts organisations through workshops, group discussions, one to one consults and survey findings.

The aim of this Plan is to provide a route map and clear direction for VASW to build on its strategic relationships to grow advocacy, support and partnerships within and outside the region.

I.2 ISSUES FACING THE SECTOR IN THE REGION

From our research there were a number of areas that were consistently flagged as major issues facing the sector in the region, many of which are common to the arts across the country, whilst others were particularly relevant to the region. This is not an exhaustive list but includes:

- *Surviving rather than thriving* – the constant focus on where the next funding is coming from is affecting long-term planning, building and maintaining partnerships and the ability to look beyond the immediate priorities. The issue of being time poor and short-term focused is affecting the ability to look further afield and to take risks.
- *Pressure to deliver social and economic benefits* – the changing emphasis from public sector funders to encourage all those in receipt of public funding to demonstrate and evidence both social and economic impacts within their locality is putting additional strain on limited resources.
- *Relevance, accessibility, sustainability, resilience* – Arts Council England is prioritising these areas in its new 10 year strategy, and other public funders are following suit, such as local authorities, trusts and foundations are also focusing their resources on artists and organisations that meet the enhanced priorities around relevance to local communities, widening access to a broad range of audiences, how to deliver economic and environmental sustainability and therefore long-term resilience.
- *Need to be more entrepreneurial and connected with business* – this is not a new issue for the sector, but it is becoming increasingly important as public sector funding decreases. However many arts organisations and artists are ill equipped to develop successful relationships with the business sector that can generate benefits for both parties.
- *Dispersed nature of region and visual arts sector* – there are obvious clusters of visual arts activity in the major urban conurbations, but there are many

artists and small organisations also based in rural areas who often feel overlooked. Due to the nature of the region, there are limited opportunities to meet other practitioners in other parts of the region. The concept of isolation in the region in relation to London as the centre of the visual arts ecology is also cited as an issue.

- *Infrastructure challenges* – the limited nature of public transport is an obvious issue but there are others including the patchy nature of digital infrastructure and the lack of affordable artists' studios.
- *Demographic challenges, seasonality, pockets of deprivation* – as a nation the ageing population will create specific challenges, not least in relation to healthcare and social services, but funders continue to prioritise programmes for young people. As a region so reliant on the tourism industry with pockets experiencing overtourism at peak times, the seasonality can provide opportunities but also specific challenges, particularly in relation to lack of affordable housing and low paid seasonal work for local people resulting in pockets of high deprivation and young people leaving the area.
- *Talent development and retention* – a particular challenge in a region with perceived limited opportunities for career progression in the visual arts and young people leaving to pursue their education and careers elsewhere.
- *Artists' low pay* – a perennial issue across the sector, across the country, but is there more that the sector could do collectively? (see Arts Council Wales' new National Lottery funding guidelines regarding minimum pay rates).

- *Lack of profile for the region's visual arts sector* – particularly in comparison to other artforms and due to the high-profile challenges that some ACE funded organisations have faced recently.

I.3 ANALYSIS OF CURRENT VASW COMMUNICATIONS & ADVOCACY

VASW has never been a cash-rich organisation as a network focused on providing support to the sector and has undergone significant change in recent years. For those that have engaged with VASW they have found it a valuable resource, however there are many practitioners who have little knowledge or an out of date understanding of what the network is and does.

With a new team, a developing business plan and new focus, now is the time to address the needs of the sector and how to shape the communications and advocacy to position VASW as the go-to resource for the visual arts in the South West region. With limited resources there is an acknowledgement by the VASW team, steering group and the wider sector that VASW has to identify its key areas of focus and prioritise.

Website

From a communications perspective the website is the most important tool within VASW's communications and advocacy work. It is the first port of call for members and non-members interested in finding out about the visual arts in the SW and the challenge is that it must work for multiple different audiences and their different needs.

Following a website audit and survey of its membership, VASW is embarking on the development of a new, more flexible website designed to address the core needs identified by members, some of which are referenced in the audience/stakeholder profiles section of this report.

This new website will go live in early 2020 and there will need to be a targeted proactive campaign to promote the benefits of using the site and how artists and organisations can contribute content to the site – a key function that will ensure its effectiveness.

Online marketing and social media

A new marketing & digital plan has been put in place that focuses on a structured approach to digital communications with measurement and analysis built into campaign activity. VASW has therefore stepped up its online communications and social media activity through creating more content, promoting activity across the region and sharing news and information from partners.

It is likely that the majority of content (developed and supplied) will be focused on promoting upcoming exhibitions, projects and conferences; work, training and funding opportunities; research findings and examples of best practice. However it will be important to make sure that there is regular content shared through relevant platforms to help in the delivery of VASW's aims and objectives.

Advocacy tools

As part of this report, there is an advocacy map detailing the priority audiences and stakeholders. This map is a starter for ten and will need to be taken on by the VASW team and reviewed on an annual basis. The aim of this tool is to help to focus and prioritise stakeholders and along with other advocacy tools to be sent as follow ups to this report (e.g. Stakeholder Engagement Chart), help to understand what each different stakeholder group needs and what VASW can realistically provide.

Being able to articulate VASW's offer succinctly (e.g. elevator pitch) will be essential in developing discussions with partners, especially those outside the visual arts sector. Being able to share the learnings from projects that VASW either initiates or facilitates will be important in building advocacy with partners across the region. As a network, VASW is only as strong as the sector it represents, so quality data about the depth and breadth and impacts of the sector is essential evidence to support the promotion of the sector to all stakeholders.

I.4 FINDINGS FROM CONSULTS, WORKSHOPS, & SURVEYS

There was consistent feedback from all those consulted that VASW needs to have a clarity of purpose that is articulated to the sector and that it must be *of/from/for* the sector rather than being above the sector.

The following areas were identified as priorities for VASW:

- *Advocacy* – to be a consistent, independent voice for the sector, but not get involved in political lobbying
- *Support & facilitate* – to be the catalyst rather than the delivery agency for projects that meet the needs of the sector, galvanising partnerships and cluster working
- *Opportunities* – share information, especially through the VASW website as the go-to resource for events, freelance and job opportunities, funding opportunities, and updates on the sector
- *Networking* – providing opportunities for individual artists and organisations to meet, feel connected and to participate in collective peer learning, sharing and problem-solving
- *Measures of success* – for VASW to become the go to organisation for advocacy support, advice, networking and signposting for the visual arts sector in the region

Feedback from Chief Executives/Artistic Directors is that there is real value in VASW providing a platform for the exchange/sharing of creative ideas and plans, whether it is artists that venues are developing projects with, or ideas and themes

for group exhibitions, or plans for a community & engagement project, that others may wish to be involved with, or may align with such ideas that are already forming. In addition, this grouping would welcome the opportunity to share honest conversations, including successes and failures in order to build the creative, social and economic resilience of the sector.

Questions raised requiring further conversation amongst this group included:

- Should we be focused on letting go of the necessity to thrive? It's not about doing more.
- Should we change our way of working with artists
- Should we be accepting less benefits?
- Should we focus on the redistribution of resources?
- Should we focus on deeper not more engagement?
- Should we prioritise longer-term relationships not more relationships?

2. Sharpening focus

2.1 VALUES

More work is required by the Steering Group to hone down this list of values for VASW and to agree a set that fits with the new direction of travel for the organisation. These values need to underpin everything – who you are, what you do, what you say and how you say it. These values need to be distinctive, differentiating and authentic to you.

From the workshop with the Steering Group, there were a number of 'values' that resonated at the time with multiple members of the group:

- Sharing / collaborative / partnership
- Representative
- Generosity
- Resourceful
- Ambition
- Strategic

In agreeing on your values, check each against the following questions and criteria:

1. Is this value genuine?
2. Is this value liveable, over time?
3. Is this value compelling internally?
4. Will this value resonate with your members?
5. Is this value relevant to your core mission?
6. Does this value help you be distinctive?
7. Does this value have longevity / sustainability?
8. Can you communicate this value to people?
9. Can this value be brought to life in daily activity?
10. Would you fight to preserve this value?

From the consultations, a series of **guiding principles** have emerged that outline how VASW can move forward and respond to the sector's priority needs:

- Championing the SW visual arts sector;
- Be collaborative, facilitate partnerships;
- Use data-driven insight;
- Help to leverage support & funding;
- Support professionalism;
- Prioritise activity based on sector needs.

In order to do this VASW will need to clearly articulate its role, function and ongoing activities and achievements building on the following broad **aims and objectives**:

- *Think national / international to inspire new ideas*
 - o Connect with partner organisations to understand existing and potential national/international relationships
 - o Share information about national/international best practice and collaboration opportunities.
- *Raise the visibility of the SW visual arts sector*
 - o Advocate for the sector with public sector funders
 - o Advocate for the sector with national networks within the visual arts and with other artform sectors
 - o Identify opportunities to promote the SW visual arts sector, e.g. relevant conferences
 - o Identify opportunities to generate targeted business to business media coverage in arts and relevant sector titles, e.g. Arts Professional, a-n.
- *Focus on the big issues*
 - o Identify small number of key projects and partners
 - o Communicate priority projects to the visual arts sector
 - o Share evaluation of projects with the visual arts sector and key stakeholders, e.g. funders.
- *Be a neutral broker between artists, venues and organisations*
 - o Be accessible and inclusive
 - o Be responsive to the sector's needs
 - o Help to facilitate partnerships and cluster working.

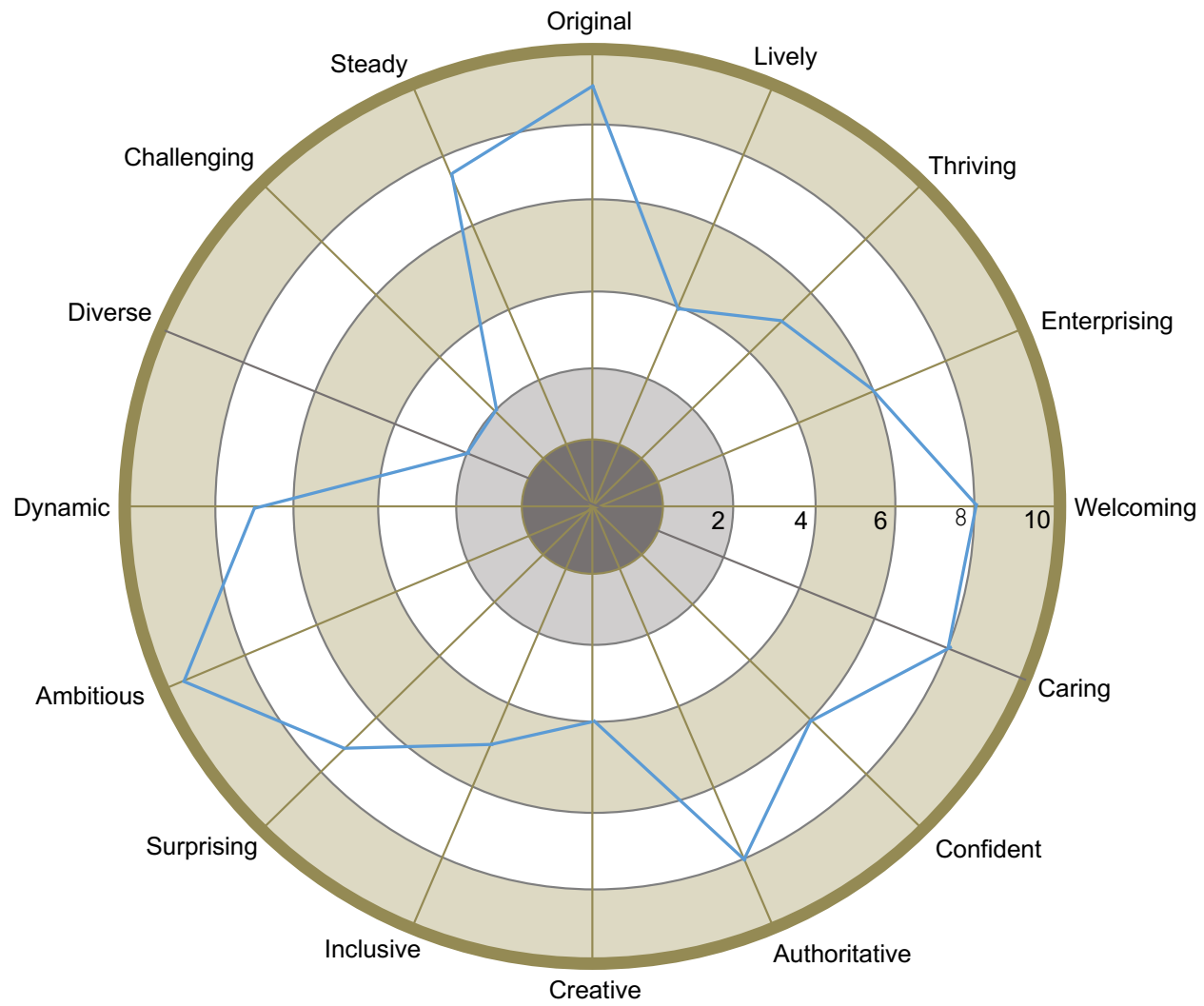
- *Connect into other arts and non-arts networks / agencies*
 - o Develop and maintain relationships with networks and agencies with shared values
 - o Review relationships regularly.
- *Work towards a more resilient visual arts sector*
 - o Keep the sector up to date with best practice learnings
 - o Bring partners together to create work that meets shared objectives and share expertise.

An organisational traits exercise was conducted as part of a workshop. The group response – rating a series of traits – is illustrated below. It clearly shows where VASW is perceived to be strong, and where it needs to focus on improvement.

The defining traits – in 2019 – appear to be:

1. Original;
2. Welcoming;
3. Caring;
4. Authoritative;
5. Surprising
6. Ambitious;
7. Dynamic;
8. Steady.

An organisational traits wheel for VASW

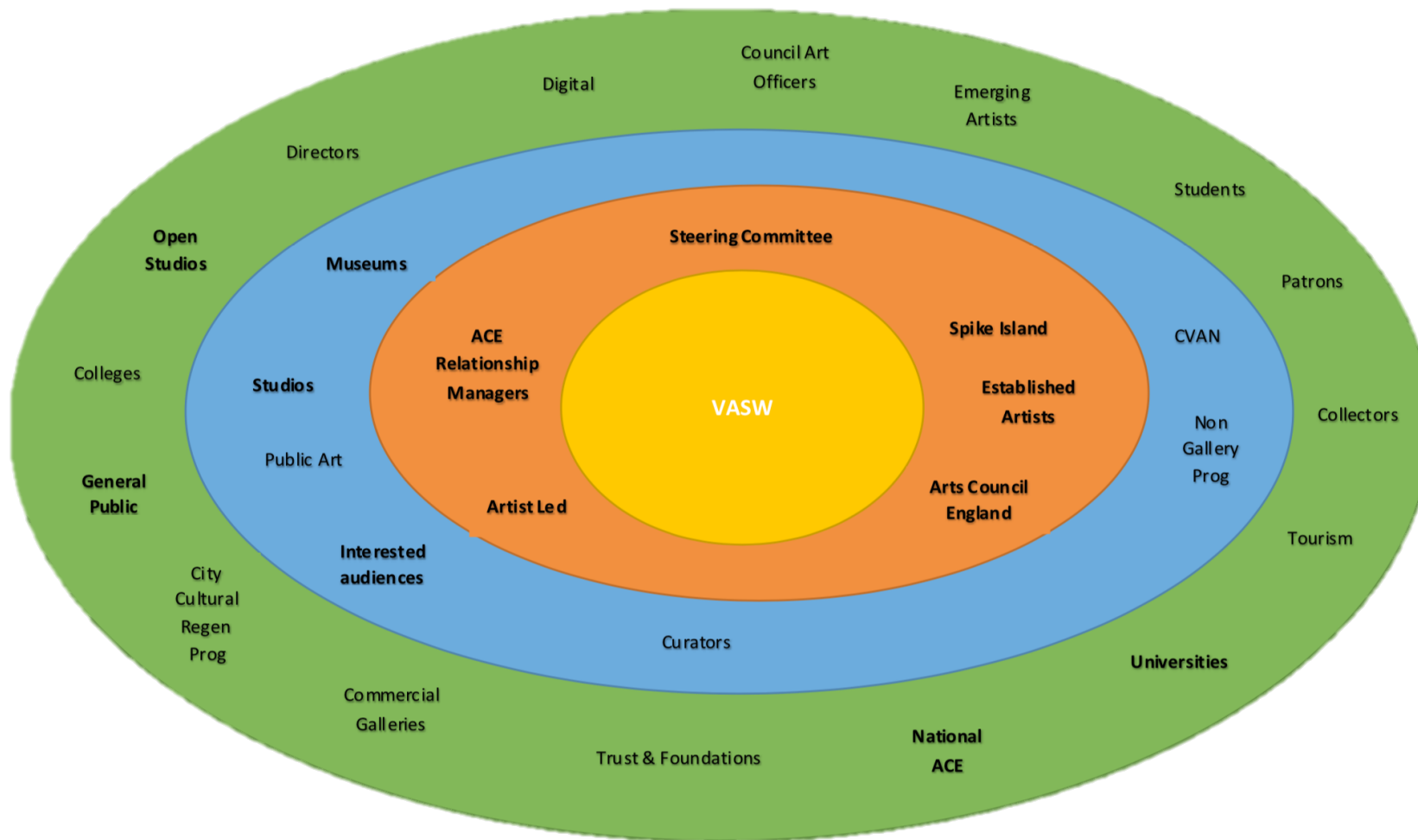


2.2 AUDIENCE / STAKEHOLDER PROFILES

As a business to business network, VASW engages with a range of different audiences and stakeholders with differing needs, although there are a core range of services that most audiences and stakeholders need (hence the repetition in the list below) including:

- *Individual artists* – emerging through to established
 - Need to feel connected
 - Discover work opportunities
 - Discover training opportunities
 - Make connections with venues
 - Share information about their work
 - Sharing creative ideas with a view to develop new work
 - Share learnings: research, expertise, case studies
 - Discover best practice e.g. evaluation, accessing funding
 - Find out what's on/upcoming
 - Potential national and international connections.
- *Artists' collectives* – emerging through to established
 - Need to feel connected
 - Discover work opportunities
 - Discover training opportunities
 - Make connections with venues
 - Share information about their work
 - Sharing creative ideas with a view to develop new work
 - Share learnings: research, expertise, case studies
- *Small-scale galleries* – urban / rural / coastal
 - Promote their offer
 - Discover funding opportunities
 - Discover training opportunities
 - Promote artist commission opportunities
 - Make connections within the region/nationally/internationally
 - Sharing creative ideas with a view to develop new work
 - Share learnings: research, expertise, case studies
 - Sharing resources, e.g. hardware, freelance support
 - Discover best practice e.g. evaluation, new ways of commissioning, working with volunteers
 - Job opportunities
 - Find out what's on / upcoming.
- *Mid-large-scale galleries* – urban / rural / coastal
 - Promote their offer
 - Discover funding opportunities
 - Discover training opportunities
 - Promote artist commission opportunities
 - Make connections within the region/nationally/internationally
 - Sharing creative ideas with a view to develop new work
 - Share learnings: research, expertise, case studies

- Sharing resources, e.g. hardware, freelance support
- Discover best practice e.g. evaluation, new ways of commissioning, working with volunteers
- Job opportunities
- Find out what's on / upcoming.
- *Arts centres / museums* – urban / rural / coastal
 - Promote their offer
 - Discover funding opportunities
 - Discover training opportunities
 - Promote artist commission opportunities
 - Make connections within the region / nationally / internationally
 - Sharing creative ideas with a view to develop new work
 - Share learnings
 - Sharing resources, e.g. hardware, freelance support
- Discover best practice e.g. evaluation, new ways of commissioning, working with volunteers
- Job opportunities
- Find out what's on / upcoming.
- *Public sector funders* – ACE, L.A.s, trusts & foundations
 - Share information & opportunities
 - Find out what's on / upcoming.
- *Non-arts partners & funders* – health & social care, youth service providers, commercial businesses & networks
 - Share information & opportunities
 - Find out what's on/upcoming
 - Use artists' directory.



Stakeholder mapping – advocacy framework

VASW > core partner > supporting stakeholders > interested parties

Bold denotes involved

Individual artists

As outlined in the recent Future Proof symposium, there are particularly challenges for those artists who have not followed the formal education route, whether young in age or transferring from another career. They are not likely to be aware of VASW or will be signposted from another partner. In order to be able to communicate effectively with these artists, the use of language will be crucial. Far too much visual arts language can be perceived as inaccessible jargon, so VASW needs to help the sector to translate such jargon into content that can be more easily understood, though this is a long-term aspiration for the sector. Similarly the sector can often be dominated by the white Western visual arts canon which thereby excludes many different audiences. VASW, just as the sector generally, must look to encourage the foregrounding of multiple voices through its communications, as it did through the content of the Future Proof symposium.

Young artists, particularly post 25 years old may find it especially difficult to access funding and grant opportunities as many programmes have age restrictions. Whilst this is a bigger issue for the sector, VASW can help to lobby partners to open up opportunities for artists at different stages in their careers.

The established publicly funded venues can often dominate the agenda but of course they play a very significant role within the visual arts sector and within their communities. They are already working with artists, but could VASW help to bring together opportunities for networking for local artists?

Visual arts audiences and attenders

Although VASW is a business-to-business network, it is important to have an understanding of who visual arts audiences are and what they are interested in and motivated by. Here are some of the highlights from the recent report – The Audience Agency: *Audiences for the Visual Arts*, August 2019:

- Half of visual arts visitors belong to the highest culturally engaged *Audience Spectrum* groups (The Audience Agency's segmentation tool);
- Visual arts attenders are younger than is true of most other artforms;
- Visual arts audiences reflect the ethnic population most closely than most other artforms;
- Visitors are looking for reflection, to learn something and to be inspired;
- Data trends show a variation in profiles and motivations across different kinds of visual arts;
- Visual arts audiences visit frequently and often alone or in adult groups;
- 64% of visitors to the visual arts in the SW live in the region;
- Audiences who live outside London are more likely to travel over an hour to visit a visual art exhibition;
- 56% of the galleries in the SW attract affluent cultural tourists travelling from over 60 mins away;
- Galleries in non-metropolitan towns and rural areas engage the most with local audiences;
- Family groups are significantly more likely to go to local galleries, whereas 44% of single adults and 51% of adult groups are willing to travel more than 30 mins to visit a gallery;
- 59% of visitors to visual arts are repeat visitors.

3. Towards a narrative

3.1 STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS & ADVOCACY

With the new direction for VASW, now is the time to implement strategic communications and advocacy systems and ways of working that become embedded into daily practice. Communications and advocacy only work successfully if they are delivered regularly and consistency by everyone within an organisation.

One of the most urgent requirements is for VASW to articulate its role, offer and services to the visual arts sector in the region and to key stakeholders. This is already somewhat underway but needs constant reinforcement through all methods of communication. Simple, clear and consistent messaging, backed up by effective delivery and measurement of programmes, networking and communications activity will help to reposition VASW as the champion for the SW visual arts sector.

As referenced earlier, different audiences have different needs and therefore messages will need to be tailored to suit the target audiences. With limited resources VASW needs to manage expectations about what it can and importantly cannot deliver, hence the importance of signposting to other services and providers.

The website needs to become the one-stop shop for information, resources and signposting about and for the SW visual arts sector. Much of the basic information that the multiple different audiences and stakeholders require can be serviced via the new VASW website and through VASW social media channels and the

e-newsletter. However VASW will be reliant on the sector contributing up to date content and uploading their content onto the VASW website. So there is an ongoing job to do, post the new website launch, in promoting the website as a tool for the sector to use as part of their own communications activity.

For public funders, the shift towards acknowledging the importance of 'place' is becoming evident in changes to policy and funding. Being able to articulate the distinctiveness of place, the role of the visual arts in placemaking and the sense of belonging are all significant for the SW – a place that has a long-standing relationship to/with artists and landscape in particular. Creating a narrative that brings this to life will help in promoting the region as a hot-spot for the visual arts.

It is unlikely that there is up to date relevant data outlining the economic and social value of the visual arts in the SW, however there may be data relating to particular areas within the region, and for individual organisations. In order to advocate for the sector, having up to date evidence is essential. There may be an opportunity to work with a HEI partner to map existing data and gaps.

3.2 FIRST DRAFT OVERARCHING NARRATIVE

This is very much an outline draft to provide a flavour of what a narrative needs to include. This is the kind of copy that can be used in communications with stakeholders for advocacy purposes. It will need more detailed and specific information, references

and figures to give it weight. It will need to be supplemented by cluster specific examples too, e.g. Bristol, working young people etc. It can then be edited accordingly.

The South West region has always been a magnet for the visual arts, whether for artists to take inspiration from the rugged coastal landscape or rural remoteness or to join established urban clusters of artists.

The region will always be connected to major internationally renowned artists, from the past, such as: Joshua Reynolds, Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson, as well as the present including Damien Hirst and Richard Long, but of course that's just the tip of the iceberg. Artists are the lifeblood of our communities in the region, as well as making connections with national and international partners.

As well as nationally significant venues such as Tate St. Ives and the re-emerging Arnolfini, the region boasts a wealth of small, medium and large-scale visual arts venues working with artists from all over the world...

3.3 KEY MESSAGES

1. One-stop shop for the SW visual arts sector.
2. Knowledgeable, approachable, well-connected resource.
3. Accessible to anyone working professionally within the visual arts sector in the SW.

4. Prioritising the SW visual arts sector's needs to build resilience for the sector.
5. Championing the SW visual arts sector.

3.4 TIMELINE

Autumn 2019

- Steering Group accepts Communications and Advocacy plan.
- Agree advocacy mapping.
- Identify advocacy opportunities with key stakeholders and allocate tasks to Steering Group.
- Agree website wireframes.
- Agree communications priorities based on work programme.

Spring 2019

- Launch new website with communications campaign.
- Test and evaluate website usage.
- Capture content for each project that VASW is involved in to share when appropriate.
- Identify HEI partner to map available data and gaps about the SW visual arts sector.