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STAGE THEATRE

Local authority arts funding plummets

by Alistair Smith

Councils in England and Wales have cut funding for the arts by more than a third since 2008, according to a new report.

Arts Development UK has released the results of a survey claiming that the average local authority arts budget has fallen by 38% since 2008. In the last year alone, the level has dropped by 16.3% – down from an average of \$455,819 in 2010 to \$381,605 in 2011.

The report reveals an ongoing decline, starting under the last Labour government but continuing unchecked under the current administration. Meanwhile, it warns the full impact of the recent financial settlement imposed on local authorities by central government has not yet been felt – 93% of local arts services are expecting cuts next year, with 10% of arts services warning they are under threat of closure. More than 40 authorities have already completely scrapped their arts service in the past nine years.

Arts Development UK chair Lorna Brown told *The Stage*: "The picture for local government funding for the arts is one of declining resources. My concern is that it is the first year under the new government financial settlement and at the moment the average reduction is 16%, whereas the reduction to local government from central government generally is nearly 30%, so I think we will see more in the next few years."

Brown said the arts were vulnerable to cuts from local government because they are not a statutory service.

However, she added: "The arts are not being singled out among the many things that local authorities have the right, but not the statutory requirement to do. All public services are being squeezed. So, it

would be unrealistic to expect there to have been no impact on the arts – it's not over and above what is happening to anybody else. Let's not set ourselves up as victims in this, we're not, we're in a very difficult financial situation for public services and consequently the arts are having to take a share in that cut."

Brown said the cuts had been ongoing for some time, but had taken a "step-change" in the last year. She added: "There is a perception that we have gone through ten years of massive investment in the arts, which is true [in terms of central government], but local authority budgets have been under a degree of pressure for quite some time."

Labour shadow culture secretary Ivan Lewis said the results revealed a "downward spiral" in local funding for the arts.

"There's been a lot of focus on the arts council decisions recently, but we have to look at what's happening in terms of local government, higher education and schools. In terms of local government, there are real issues to be concerned about. There's a downward spiral that should be a real cause for concern. If you look at the cuts local authorities are facing next year, which are severe, then the danger is that arts will be disproportionately affected.

"There's a danger local authorities could see the arts as a soft target and that would be a mistake because the baseline money [they] spend on arts is minimal, the return is remarkable in terms of social benefit, economic benefit, quality of life, bringing communities together."

He added that while it would be "impossible to win the argument right now", the aim for the arts should be to become a statutory service. However, he said before that could happen the sector needed to secure public funding for the arts.



PRIVATE COLLECTION

Leading ladies return to the limelight

Sarah Siddons poses as the Tragic Muse in this 1784 portrait by the Studio of Joshua Reynolds. The painting will go on display at the National Portrait Gallery this autumn as part of a flagging exhibition, *The First Actresses* – Nell Gwynn to Sarah Siddons, opening on October 20. Curator Professor Gill Perry said that Siddons "was the best known, possibly the most successful tragic actress of her day, who commanded an enormous salary and, according to all the gossip columns, used go around like a reigning queen".