

# OPEN LETTER TO THE ARTS SECTOR

**June 2016**

Art Connects Us.

That is the headline under which we launched our new strategy for the arts at the British Council exactly one month before the EU referendum. A great deal of what we have heard from you, our colleagues and partners, is that there is understandably enormous uncertainty following the vote. One thing I am certain of, however, is that the phrase Art Connects Us has never been more true, nor more essential.

I was frankly shocked by the result and, like all of my colleagues, saddened by the shameful racist incidents that followed. These incidents do not and can never represent us as a nation. We remain at heart a liberal, tolerant country - one that believes in freedom of expression and respects a democratic process. The arts are uniquely able to demonstrate and uphold these British values. Whatever the outcome of these months of doubt, we must demonstrate to the rest of the world that this remains the case.

After time for reflection, we must reinforce our activity. It is more important than ever to reach out across Europe and maintain relationships between the peoples of the UK and the continent. The work of our cultural sector is crucial to enabling this and ensuring the UK is seen as an international, outwardly-focused, creative nation. We know this to be true around the world - last year, the UK-Mexico year of culture was one of the largest cultural engagements the UK has delivered with 393 events attended by 1.5million visitors, while research carried out by IPSOS Mori showed that the arts is one of the top five contributors to a nation's attractiveness to others.

It is through the arts and our artists that we can question, explore and respond to challenging times. It was artists who responded so quickly to Apartheid in the 1960's, and to the current Syrian civil war, as can be seen by Queens of Syria, which opens at the Young Vic next week. Already, the Royal Court and others are responding to the referendum. We have also begun our own response, with the publication of a series of essays entitled The Morning After.

I hope these various responses continue and grow, and we collectively explore a more positive future together. At the British Council, we will redouble our efforts to help the artists, institutions and arts companies of the UK to reach new audiences and markets overseas, and to help promote the sector we work in and for as one of the brightest lights of the UK. We have already doubled the size of our programme in the last five years and we seek to double the international activity of UK arts organisations in the next five. In Europe we have recently set up the region's first network of creative hubs, which will incubate and develop young creative business from entrepreneurial infancy to creative and financial success. Through a major arts and disabilities programme, we are bringing together policy makers, funders and cultural players from across the continent to explore ways that diversity in the arts is not only a social necessity but also one of the great artistic opportunities of our time. Beyond Europe, the UK will make a major contribution to the future of conflict-affected nations' prosperity by supporting the protection of their cultural heritage.

There will be challenges ahead but, in the meantime, it remains business as usual. We will continue to support artists and organisations to make connections with their

counterparts and audiences across Europe and beyond. We will now, and in the future, work with all of our European partners in a constructive and positive way to ensure people to people connections flourish and grow. Over the coming weeks, my team will be talking to you about how we can deliver this together. I hope you can join us in this mission.

Graham Sheffield CBE  
Director Arts  
British Council