

Byline: Paul Benneworth

AREMARKABLE group of North Eastern artists published an open letter this week blasting the budget plans of Nick Forbes, Newcastle City Council's leader.

The breadth and achievement of the group, from Antony Gormley to Mark Knopfler and Pat Barker to Kathryn Tickell, is truly a reminder of how strong the arts and culture scene in Newcastle has become.

These great artists argue that funding arts is not just 'culture for its own sake' - our recent economic transformation has drawn heavily on arts and culture. And these budget cuts - completely axing council funding in these areas - certainly jeopardize that transformation.

Icons of the North East cultural landscape will see their council subsidies disappear overnight. No more city council funding for Northern Stage, the Live Theatre, the Great North Museum or the [Laing Art Gallery](#). The **Laing Art Gallery** in Newcastle Upon Tyne in North East England is located on New Bridge Street. It was founded in 1901, and opened in 1904. It is now managed by Tyne and Wear Museums and sponsored by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

..... [Click the link for more information.](#) Museums and galleries may survive, but they'll struggle to reach out to new audiences, particularly schoolchildren. I still remember fondly our annual pantotrips from Cullercoats Primary to the Theatre Royal. In those days, everyone in the class could go, regardless of parental ability to pay.

These cuts will mean schools either abandon their cultural programmes or stigmatise for life people whose parents can't afford the escalating ticket prices. The result will be to exclude a whole group from engaging with culture.

And there's an everyday dimension to these cuts as well. Ten of the city's public libraries may be forced to shut their doors forever, cutting vital access to book loans. Because it is not just about cuts to elite culture - this is destroying everyone's access to all kinds of culture.

Although developing skills is never the point of culture, what is true is that engaging with culture helps to engage people with society at large and develop all kinds of interests which are useful for the knowledge economy. So the letter's signatories are quite correct to point out that this decision is highly damaging and socially regressive.

For me, the villain of this piece isn't Mr Forbes. He is making the best of a bad hand dealt to him by the Government.

Nestling behind their rhetoric of 'all in this together', the Government has made it almost impossible for Northern urban councils to do their job properly. Funding formulae have been fiddled with to divert resources from the North to the South, wrapped up in weasel words of investing in success.

The Government rationalises this fiddle with a belief that we in the North are 'shirkers and skivers' while their voters in the South are 'workers and strivers'. But a recent report from Joseph Rowntree has conclusively put paid to one of their important myths - that widespread intergenerational unemployment makes us shirkers and skivers.

That makes it convenient for the Government to say that if you invest in culture in the North East then you are just subsidising middle-class hobbies. After all, the unemployed are too feckless and fecund to care about arts and culture.

But the report shows that supposed behaviour simply doesn't exist. Society's poorest share the ambitions for their children with middle-class people, including going on school trips and reading library books. They go without themselves to try to offer their children opportunities for jobs, careers and success, but these cuts may make this a bridge too far.

We all rely on publicly funded opportunities to realise our potential.

At a stroke, Newcastle City Council is cutting the poorest's opportunity to access the arts' transformational power.

We should rightly be proud of what culture has recently brought our region. And we should remember and punish at the ballot box those Westminster gradgrinds who would steal it from our children.

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