

# Museums Northumberland bait - Artist Impressions

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Participants from the Open Door project in Cramlington working with artist Eva Mileusnic, credit: Jason Thompson

## Introduction

**Evaluations of the Museums Northumberland bait programme<sup>1</sup> have consistently highlighted the influence of the programme on artist and practitioner professional practice both in terms of the quality of the artistic product produced and the quality of the engagement process required to work with communities in Creative People and Places (CPP) areas.**

**This case study seeks to update and explore the impact of the programme on professional practice from a variety of artists' perspectives whilst also identifying the key aspects of support provided by the programme and partners. The case study comprises analysis of interviews with nine artists including six with experience of supporting more than one project across multiple phases of the programme and encompassing a variety of art forms including visual arts, writing, photography, theatre and music.**

**All quotes are taken directly from interviews with artists who have delivered one or more projects commissioned by Museums Northumberland bait.**

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.creativepeopleplaces.org.uk/sites/default/files/bait%20Evaluation%20Report%20Years%201-3.pdf>

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## Project information

### Project and Partners

The artists featured in this case study have worked on a variety of projects of different sizes, durations, budgets and art forms. Examples include large scale public events formed through extensive cross-art form input from a range of groups, work to develop skills and encourage sustained participation in specific art forms and support to produce a range of work which can be shown or performed including music, theatre and exhibitions featuring a range of visual art.

#### Artist experience

All artists commissioned to work on and develop projects with Museums Northumberland bait necessarily have a background in, and a range of relevant skills and experience of, supporting participation in the arts or delivering participatory arts projects. Each of the artists consulted were also confident in working in an area like South East Northumberland where people are less involved in arts and cultural activities than elsewhere in England<sup>2</sup>.

#### ***'It's not a completely new challenge'***

Artists' experience and knowledge has been gained from working either as individual practitioners or as part of a larger company prior to their involvement with Museums Northumberland bait. This includes building expertise in a variety of participatory skills and techniques in order to work effectively with communities or specific groups including young offenders, adults in recovery from addictions or with mental health problems, people affected by social isolation and groups of people of similar age including young or older people.

#### Opportunities to test or develop practice

Although artists had a range of experience of delivering participatory arts activities, all reinforced the value of the opportunities provided by Museums Northumberland bait in developing and putting their skills and experience into practice in line with the needs of the specific projects and the groups of participants.

#### ***'It's always a learning process'***

#### ***'Meeting new and different communities helps you think through your practice'***

However, in the majority of cases, rather than developing completely new approaches, artists stressed the importance of having the opportunity to apply their existing skills and knowledge in order to work effectively with different groups. They outlined how they were empowered to apply their practice in response to the characteristics and requirements of participants in a flexible and supportive environment underpinned by the trust, communication and support from the Museums Northumberland bait team. For example, for an improvising and experimenting musician, a project shaped by the input of the participants through a process of co-design and/or co-production enabled them to put their skills in this area into practice.

#### ***'You have the context but often not the definite shape of a project. It's an opportunity for learning from different content, different activities or ways***

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/taking-part-survey>

***for the public to engage with the work'***

***'Every group and project requires a new way of working because the people inform your parameters'***

For some, less experienced artists, their involvement had enabled them to gain experience and confidence in using new methods of working (for them) with people who are less involved in arts and cultural activities. Examples included facilitating a workshop with an all-male group, exploring different media inspired by project participants or fully utilising co-design or co-production in line with the ethos of the CPP programme.

***'My practice fits in neatly with CPP - participants work with the creative process. It's all about the journey and the experience'***

***'We had a greater emphasis on engagement which allowed us to work more closely with the community'***

***'Just something being there is a big thing - getting over the obstacles to be there'***

For a number of artists however, their contribution to the Museums Northumberland bait programme has extended their experience and knowledge of other, non-artistic elements of their practice, specifically different tendering, project management, partnership working and evaluation processes to those experienced previously or with other clients.

***'I learnt about managing expectations, what was possible to get out of it'***

***'You can't have fingerprints on all aspects'***

The approach to working with Museums Northumberland bait

Artists that had worked on more than one commission for Museums Northumberland bait were able to outline some of the changes in the approach to supporting the programme. The key trends observed included:

- A move towards stronger collaborative working underpinned by co-design and co-production;
- More extensive partnership working; and
- Comprehensive two-way discussions with project partners, often teams of artists and participants in order to develop and manage projects.

These changes were associated with stronger programme management, better communication, a clarity of strategic planning and greater trust placed in both artists and project partners to deliver projects in conjunction with the community. As a result, a number of artists explained how they felt less exposed as projects were allowed, and encouraged, to evolve in line with the ownership afforded to participants under the stewardship of a partnership of skilled artists and informed project partners driven by programme objectives and quality assurance.

***'The project certainly wasn't typical in terms of responding to the***

***community group and working with different artists - you aren't a jack of all trades'***

***'It was all discussed early on - bait were amazing to work with, knew exactly how to handle me while providing me with all the information I needed'***

***'They're good at seeing areas for connection as well as sorting the administration to make the job easier for artists'***

***'It's part of how they work, and the work is richer for it'***

What is distinctive about working with Museums Northumberland bait?

Artists were able to outline a range of factors which differentiate working with Museums Northumberland bait from their other clients. The overwhelming factor was the availability of sufficient time and flexibility for artists to maximise the quality of engagement with participants in order to shape content. This includes periods of R&D or taster sessions to inform longer term projects and the ability to amend project plans to react to changes in circumstances in participants' lives.

***'Time enables you to build a rapport - it's the bigger picture, looking at projects and people holistically with the support of partners'***

***'Taster sessions allow you to get to know the group and the people - the bait approach allows this to happen'***

***'Genuine commitment to community involvement in the creative process - some clients are more patronising'***

There was a degree of frustration on occasion linked to the intensity of project management encountered at the beginning of a project and amount of time taken to establish project parameters. However, the availability of time to build relationships with participants, anticipate and explore challenges and increase the quality of engagement with people was also associated with a smoother journey for the artist.

***'I was trusted to do something a little unusual, they had faith in me. The ability to take a risk is really liberating'***

***'Other companies or commissioners cannot resist sticking their oar in!'***

***'The approach used by bait in the early stages made the whole project clearer and was helped by regular meetings with partners as part of a collaborative approach'***

The feeling of artists being valued by Museums Northumberland bait was also reflected in conversations with artists with experience of working for other CPP programmes. This is reinforced by a positive attitude to risk, recognition of skills in terms of pay and higher levels of trust than typically afforded by other commissioners.

***'bait have taken the idea of community commissioning and supported artists to improve it'***

***'The arts have to be the priority'***

Artists were also keen to stress the weight placed on the creative exploration of the artistic process by Museums Northumberland bait in contrast to the emphasis on the end product by the majority of clients. Whilst recognising the benefits of a final exhibition or performance to showcase the work of participants, artists recognised the value of co-design and co-production and the positive impact on health and wellbeing.

***'bait understand the process and the impact on health and wellbeing - some others just want nice photos at the end of the programme'***

The impact of this work was stated to be enhanced by the positive relationships with, and contributions to projects by, often longstanding community or statutory sector partners who had grown to be able to support and strengthen the project process. When coupled with the support, guidance and knowledge of the Museums Northumberland bait team, overall, artists remarked positively on the support structure underpinning projects and the availability of specialist skills and knowledge to overcome a range of challenges.

***'There's more opportunity to talk quite frankly about the creative process - it's not all about the product'***

***'The level of support from partners allowed me to be more adventurous and experiment more'***

The requirement to review projects at the end of an artist contract was something which artists revealed does not always happen at all, or to the same extent, with every client. Artists appreciated the time allocated to review and reflect on a project and the ability to inform both the programme's future work and their own practice. This was exemplified by opportunities for freelance artists to come together and share information and good practice in recognition of the challenges faced in participatory arts practice.

***'We're often a social worker first and artist second'***

***'I didn't feel as isolated as I did with other clients'***

### **Key challenges**

The challenges in working with Museums Northumberland bait from the perspective of artists are outlined below:

- Ensuring that the full range of skills, experience and competencies of some artists/ artists companies are identified in the commissioning process. Artists do not want to be pigeonholed as 'just community artists'.
- Whilst the degree of thought and desire to link project briefs to the programme aims and objectives was clear to artists, this was stated to sometimes produce overly-complex project briefs with ambitious targets.
- Project activity in the later phases of the Museums Northumberland bait programme has

increasingly necessitated working with a greater number of partners. Whilst recognising the merits in terms of quality of engagement and product, larger partnerships require consistently high levels of buy in and collaboration to remain effective.

- Artists need to be very much aware of the social, health and personal outcomes that can be generated through Museums Northumberland bait project work. This requires knowledge of the support needs of participants and communication with partners, (e.g. a support organisation) to adequately track progress and respond to changing needs and circumstances throughout a project, and as part of an exit strategy.
- Whilst the approach to working with Museums Northumberland bait typically offers the opportunity for freedom and space in the creative process, this needs to be balanced with Arts Council England requirements to complete monitoring and evaluation including capturing personal data from participants. Artists acknowledged however that a more balanced approach to collecting monitoring data from project participants had been introduced in later phases of the programme.

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## Outcomes and impact – what changed as a result?

The Museums Northumberland bait programme has worked with a range of artists and practitioners since its inception in 2013. Some of the key lessons in maximising the quality of outcomes for participants, artists and partners are outlined below.

### Lessons learnt

Key areas of learning which can inform the ongoing role of artists in supporting the programme and creating positive impacts and outcomes for people across South East Northumberland include:

- Creating projects with multiple layers maximises accessibility and buy-in.
- Encouraging and allowing artists to be flexible in their approach to engaging participants in line with the characteristics of the group or individual.
- Providing sufficient time and flexibility, whilst working towards programme targets, for artists to build relationships with participants to the benefit of both the quality of the engagement process and the ultimate artistic product.
- Maximising the knowledge of all partners including Museums Northumberland bait staff and crucially community-based partners to support project development and legacy outcomes.
- It is important to have a celebration of the work produced through CPP both in terms of individual and project legacy.

Based on their experience of the Museums Northumberland bait programme and South East Northumberland as a whole, artists were also able to provide a summary of the key drivers and motivations behind people successfully engaging with the arts. The most frequently cited factors included:

- Enjoying experiencing arts activities in a group of likeminded people.
- Recognising the benefits of participating in the arts including tackling a range of mental and physical health problems.

- People trying to achieve a stated target or objective, (e.g. improving or learning a new skill, reducing their own social exclusion).
- Local community groups or services gaining confidence in accessing the programme offer and/or encouraging participation independently of the programme amongst their members.
- Overcoming barriers to engaging in the arts, (e.g. people doubting their own creativity, financial pressures, not knowing about opportunities, making the arts offer relevant to people's lives and interests).
- Increasing accessibility to artistic activities.
- Gaining the trust of people.
- Effective signposting to arts and crafts activities from a variety of channels, (e.g. GPs, word of mouth, community groups).

### Key successes

The artists consulted outlined a range of successes emanating from their involvement with the Museums Northumberland bait programme. Examples include:

- Participants in art workshops designed to increase skills and confidence as part of an employability programme being inspired to try out a range of different artforms and sustain their practice independently.
- Groups and participants meeting outside of projects - sustaining arts engagement and reducing social isolation.
- Producing a large scale interactive public event for families attended by over 3,000 people incorporating the work of people of all ages including charities, Brownies groups and over 600 local people.
- Witnessing the positive impact of participation in arts activities on individuals and groups including people being supported to overcome a range of issues such as addictions, mental health problems and social exclusion.
- Supporting groups to establish themselves as constituted arts groups to maintain and expand participation initially inspired through the programme.
- Observing people gaining in skills, confidence, ideas and self-expression.
- Building productive relationships with a range of service professionals working across public health, social care and a range of charities to enhance their delivery through the arts.
- Artists developing their own practice both through engaging directly with project participants, but also producing their own work as part of a commission. Artists expressed a particular satisfaction in developing work influenced by, or using elements of, participants' own experiences and evolving arts practice. In turn, participants express a great deal of pride in seeing their own work presented alongside 'established quality artists' as a celebration of their time working together.

### Influencing change in artist practice

All artists stated that they had learnt from their experience of working as part of the Museums

Northumberland bait programme. However, any subsequent impact on their practice differed from artist to artist and encompassed both artistic and non-artistic aspects of their practice. Examples include:

- Providing experience of mentoring project participants over an extended period of time outside of direct contact in project sessions to support people to sustain, diversify and add value to their developing interests and practice.
- Developing models of work based on those developed for a site-specific event for Museums Northumberland bait which have been incorporated into work for other clients.
- Learning from meeting and working with a diverse range of groups to inform and enhance approaches to maximising the potential impact and enjoyment for people of different ages, genders and cultures.

### ***‘It helps me think through my practice’***

- Informing methods to collect data on participants and evaluate work where projects are not readily accessible, (e.g. a drama project hosted in a mainstream venue such as a theatre).
- Organising contracts, staged payment schedules, fees and a budget for materials more accurately and in line with those agreed with Museums Northumberland bait.

### ***‘The project has created a new benchmark for me. I now go in with a higher bar and clear expectations. I can push for that on other projects in terms of both budget and time’***

- Changing the way of working with other artists to be more open as part of a productive and holistic approach to collaborative working.
- Being more proficient in terms of project management and administration including maintaining better quality paperwork to plan, record and reflect on session content.
- Being able to accept, bid for and be successful in winning a wider range of projects due to the experience gained working on a Museums Northumberland bait project.
- Learning to tune into the needs of a group more effectively by being patient, responding to the direction of the group and trusting the creative process.
- Allocating time and resource to reflect on the project process and impacts.



Artist Kate Fox in creative writing taster session, credit: Jason Thompson



Frost of Forgetfulness Creative team, credit: Richard Kenworthy

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## Evidence of progress against Theory of Change

### **Ambition: to make a change in levels of participation in quality arts activity**

The skills, experience and competencies of artists have undoubtedly supported increased levels of participation in quality arts across the Museums Northumberland bait programme. It is important to recognise the role of programme staff in identifying and facilitating a supportive environment in order to maximise the added value of the artist role and the growing competencies amongst project partners to develop and maintain the impacts of artists' work beyond the formal end of projects.

### **Ambition: to involve local people**

Artists have utilised a range of approaches to maximise the role and input of local people in the creative process through a range of engagement activity and innovative collaborative working to shape project development with participants. It should be noted however that artists have been afforded the flexibility and time to develop projects with the use of R&D activity, taster sessions or the formation of project steering groups with the support and input of the programme staff. As a result, artists have been afforded the freedom, trust and opportunity to employ a range of co-design and co-production techniques to enable local people to shape both their engagement and the ultimate artistic output.

### **Ambition: to demonstrate the benefits to well-being of quality arts activity**

Artists with the skills to engage and work with a range of participants and partners have worked to achieve a range of health and social outcomes through a variety of projects. Using the supportive structures provided by Museums Northumberland bait staff, artists recognised the journeys of both individuals and groups reflected in increased levels of self-confidence and reduced levels of anxiety and social exclusion. Artists also reflected on how their work with Museums Northumberland bait had increased their own levels of confidence, both as a result of expanding their own practice, but also confirming the quality of their work by observing the impact on project participants.

*'It has had a life changing personal impact, confirming why I do what I do'*

### **Ambition: to leave a sustainable legacy of enhanced capacity, resources and infrastructure for the arts in South East Northumberland**

The Museums Northumberland bait programme continues to work with and support artists to work effectively with participants and partners to engage and sustain participation in the arts. In addition to supporting artists to develop their experience and practice, the collaborative nature of projects has ensured that the work of artists working in partnership with participants and partners will support a legacy of skills and capacity to maintain participation beyond the end of projects.

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#### Our Funders



#### Our Consortium

Researched and written by Wavehill as part of the evaluation of bait (2019)  
[wavehill@wavehill.com](mailto:wavehill@wavehill.com) [www.wavehill.com](http://www.wavehill.com)