

Museums Northumberland bait - Brothers in Arts



Brothers-in-Arts, credit: Jason Thompson

Introduction

A resident survey commissioned by Museums Northumberland bait in 2016 found that engagement in the arts amongst men in South East Northumberland, at 62%, was 15 percentage points less than that of women. The Brothers-in-Arts project emerged from research commissioned by Museums Northumberland bait to explore the reasons why fewer men were taking up opportunities created through the programme. The research, based on 199 interviews with men from across South East Northumberland, revealed some common themes including a reluctance amongst men to engage in new and/or group activities and older men in particular feeling that they needed to justify a love for the arts.

The research highlighted a number of artforms which are seen as more acceptable to men including those with a practical or technical element to them, for example, photography, playing an instrument, creative writing or IT/digital-related activities amongst younger men including web or graphic design. The research also highlighted a number of catalysts to men engaging in the arts including participating in arts activities with their families or in using the arts to explore a specific topic or shared interest, for example, local heritage.

Project information

Project aims

The project, originally called 'Men and the Arts', had objectives to test the research findings by further exploring the barriers and catalysts to men engaging in the arts. The aim was for a core steering group of men to agree a programme of activities and work in partnership with the lead artists to engage further men's groups to encourage greater levels of participation in the arts.

Target participants

The project broadly targeted men of all ages and backgrounds from across South East Northumberland whilst trying to achieve a balanced sample by age or socioeconomic characteristics in order to inform the relevance of project outcomes.

Projects and partners

The projects and partners featured in this case study include:

- **Museums Northumberland bait** Creative People and Places programme as lead delivery partner managed by the Arts for Wellbeing Manager
- **Lead facilitators** - Danielle Burn and Tom Kindley
- **Artists** - Phyllis Christopher, Tommy Anderson, Ruth Johnson and Jamie Evans.
- **Northumberland Recovery Partnership**¹ - a drug and alcohol treatment service for anyone in Northumberland, 18 years old or over, who is experiencing problems with drugs and alcohol
- **Real Deal Plus**² - an Ashington-based charity supporting vulnerable people through a range of activities including work with young people
- **Newbiggin Men in Sheds**³ - a fortnightly photography project providing men with the opportunity to learn new skills whilst making new friends and keeping active.
- **Koast Radio** - local community radio station for South East Northumberland

Project Activities

A group of six men, drawn largely from Museums Northumberland bait projects, formed a steering group to test the findings of the research and discuss approaches to encouraging men from across South East Northumberland to engage in the arts. With the support of Danielle Burn and Tom Kindley the group, calling themselves 'Brothers-in-Arts', agreed upon a series of arts taster sessions to inform the wider partnership working with men's groups/groups of men based on the response to and inspiration from the different art forms and activities.

Both participants and artists highlighted the strength and sense of ownership created in the group as a result of the initial taster sessions and subsequent cultural visits or 'Go and Sees'. For example, the steering group planned and ran an animation workshop to mark International Men's Day in November 2017. They met with well-known regionally based painter Narbi Price

¹ <https://www.ntw.nhs.uk/services/northumberland-recovery-partnership>

² <http://www.realdealplus.org.uk/index.html>

³ <https://healthwatchnorthumberland.co.uk/newbiggin-men-sheds-photography-project>

who has created a series of works around Ashington including paintings for the 'Pitmen Painters: Resurfacing' exhibition at Woodhorn Museum⁴ and sampled four theatre shows during a visit to the Edinburgh Fringe. Feedback from sessions was used to inform the decisions made to approach other men's groups to inspire greater or wider engagement in the arts.

In 2019 the Brothers-in-Arts group is working with Museums Northumberland bait to plan a touring exhibition in venues across South East Northumberland and Newcastle upon Tyne to showcase the work produced by each of the groups engaged through the project and highlight the potential for other men to engage in the arts. Scheduled to run between September - December 2019, the exhibition will be hosted at Hirst Park Pavilion in Ashington, Newbiggin Maritime Centre and Summerhill Square and Northern Stage in Newcastle upon Tyne but will crucially be planned and developed by the Brothers-in-Arts and members of the groups engaged in art activities.

Examples of the work with partner organisations stimulated through the project and included in the exhibition include:

Northern Recovery Partnership (NRP)

With theatre practitioner Ruth Johnson, the Brothers-in-Arts have worked with men receiving support for problems with drugs and alcohol to co-produce an original script discussing their journeys with NRP. Building on their own experiences, members of the Brothers-in-Arts group worked alongside men being supported by NRP to explore the problems linked to addiction faced by men in South East Northumberland and their recovery journeys. The recording of the script and the production of an animation will form part of the exhibition planned for late 2019.

'This project has been one of the highlights of my ten-year career working as a theatre maker in the North East. Their honesty, warmth and openness to exploring a serious subject as well as being open to silliness has been a true gift and I think that is reflected in the quality of the script that has been created by the group, which is beautiful, funny and important.'

(Artist)

Real Deal Plus

Young people aged 10-16 attending Real Deal Plus in Ashington have worked with Ashington-based artist Jamie Evans in a series of art workshops to complete a piece of work to include in the touring exhibition scheduled for late 2019. The workshops, which involved up to 20 young men at their peak, initially used graffiti art as a hook but have progressed to include guidance on the basic principles of graffiti and abstract painting using examples of Jamie's work as inspiration.

'When I initially explained about myself, what I do as an artist, the value that I have achieved for my work and the experiences I have gained doing so the students reacted very positively. This is something I am sure that none of the students even knew was a viable possibility, especially for someone from the same background and town as themselves.'

(Artist)

The workshops were able to cover both artistic skills whilst providing inspiration to young people

⁴ <https://museumsnorthumberland.org.uk/whats-on/pitmen-painters-unseen>

who may not have thought about the arts as a potential career based on the experiences of a local artist with celebrity clients.

Men in Sheds photography group

Links were made with a men's group based in Newbiggin-by-the-Sea in receipt of public health funding to run photography workshops with an aim to boost wellbeing and mindfulness. Although just one or two of the Brothers-in-Arts group members attended intermittently, the links made with the project led to one member of the 'Men in Sheds' group joining the Brothers-in-Arts on a 'Go & See' trip to the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art and sharing some of his photography with the group. Subsequently, both groups accompanied photographer Phyllis Christopher on a walking photography tour to the Great Exhibition of the North in summer 2018. Phyllis worked with the group to improve their technical ability, expand their knowledge and appreciation of different subjects and styles whilst engaging socially with other men.

'The camera gave them the excuse to get out of the house and improve their outlook on life'

(Artist)

Koast Radio

Members of the Brothers-in-Arts group approached local community radio station Koast and gained permission to produce a two-hour show based on soundscapes of the group's experiences of growing up in South East Northumberland. Working with visual artist Tommy Anderson, the group planned, recorded and edited a series of conversations and field recordings from a visit to Woodhorn Museum using the online application GarageBand⁵. Tommy finalised the content with the input of the group, which was presented by Tommy and Tom, a member of the group, in July 2018 after training on how to use the equipment. Following feedback from Koast audience and presenters Tom was inspired to follow up his experience and has since taken up a request to host his own weekly show as a DJ and explore different approaches to using the arts to achieve positive health and wellbeing outcomes.

'It has meant a great deal to me to work with bait and Brothers-in-Art. We have tried a variety of different things, all of which have been engaging and informative and interesting. The latest projects with Koast radio have, for me been the best. It has given me a chance to connect with people in a way that I have never had before.'

(participant)

Key challenges

The challenges in planning and delivering the Brothers-in-Arts project are outlined below:

- There are logistical and practical challenges associated with managing an expansive project which has grown organically to involve multiple groups. A balance needs to be maintained between the scale of the projects and the capacity of the steering group.
- Working with vulnerable groups including those in receipt of support for mental health problems or drugs and alcohol addictions will potentially lead to inconsistent or changing

⁵ <https://www.apple.com/uk/ios/garageband>

group membership with implications for the planning and delivery of sessions by artists.

- There still remain gaps in the knowledge amongst men, and men's groups, of the wide definition of arts activities embraced by Creative People and Places, Museums Northumberland bait and wider organisations. Further work needs to be undertaken to normalise males participating in a wide range of arts and highlight the opportunities to engage.

'People just don't realise what's out there. Getting involved in one group really sparked things off for me'

(participant)

- Whilst time is often required to develop multiple strands of project activity, maintaining engagement amongst a participant steering group over a longer timeframe requires effective communications and/or agreed tasks to maintain progress in between peaks in direct arts activity.

Outcomes and impact - what changed as a result?

The members of the Brothers-in-Arts group have both extended their knowledge of, and engagement in, a range of art forms from a variety of starting points, (i.e. some were already engaged in one or more art forms whilst others were less experienced). Members have been able to try a range of different art forms and activities with some able to continue their participation in arts activities either through project partners, for example Koast FM, or in their own time. For example, one member of the steering group now visits theatres in Newcastle upon Tyne individually and with family members after a positive, new experience at the Edinburgh Fringe.

The men involved in the project have learnt to work in a group to explore male participation in the arts. Whilst the experience of working collaboratively has been a learning curve for some members of the group, especially those experiencing relative isolation as a result of health issues, work or retirement, the experience has nurtured a variety of technical and interpersonal skills including compromising and listening.

[Following retirement] 'I went from having hundreds of people to speak to at work to just me, the wife and the dog. I didn't realise just how big a change in mindset it would be'

(Participant)

'This is the first extended project that the Brothers-in-Arts have worked on together and we were happy to see that they worked as a cohesive group. They should have no problems in working towards a larger scale exhibition.'

(Artist)

Crucially members of the group have benefited from multiple opportunities to make new friends and pass on their knowledge or enthusiasm for the arts whilst enjoying new experiences and developing links with other groups.

'It has given me a chance to connect with people in a way that I have never had before'

(Participant)

'Friendships evolved slowly with talking and laughing becoming more and more part of the session'

(Artist)

The spread of activity across different groups and organisations, for example young men with Real Deal Plus and people being supported for drug and alcohol problems by NRP has provided further evidence of the role of the arts in achieving a range of health and wellbeing outcomes. For example, youth workers at Real Deal Plus outlined the step change in confidence amongst a number of young people as a result of the positive interactions with artist Jamie Evans whilst involvement in the Men in Sheds photography group provided the catalyst for members to engage with others whilst improving their photography skills.

'I've learnt to be myself through the arts'

(Project participant)

Lessons learnt

Key areas of learning which can inform ongoing and similar activities across South East Northumberland include:

- Both the initial discussions with the Brothers-in-Arts steering group, and feedback from participants and artists, has reinforced and further informed the findings of the initial research on male engagement in the arts. Key findings include:
- Certain art forms are seen as more acceptable to men from an area with a rich industrial heritage such as South East Northumberland. For example, men commented that art work which looks like it has taken 'plenty of graft' or involved technical ability, for example photography, would be easier to embrace;
- Generational transmission issues are common, (i.e. it is acceptable or easier to engage in arts activities that men have grown up with, for example, brass band music);
- Time is seen as a major barrier to arts engagement, even for people approaching or in retirement, given the demands of family life and non-arts interests;
- Artists generally found that men take longer to embrace the social side of arts participation than women;
- Men prefer to work towards an objective or end goal over an agreed period of time rather than move between unconnected activities each week; and
- Engaging in the arts with family, and particularly children or grandchildren is seen as giving men 'permission' to broaden their horizons.
- The focus and buy-in provided by the initial R&D phase of project development including taster sessions and 'Go & See' visits has informed artistic decisions in delivery and helped to sustain participation.

- Younger participants may be influenced by different aspects of participatory arts practice to older men, for example, highlighting career options available through the arts or gaining buy-in through an exciting hook such as graffiti art.
- Difficulties in aligning schedules of the steering group members resulted, on occasion, in breaks in engagement in between meetings and periods of joint arts activity.

Replicability

The following are highlighted as top tips for replicating activities supporting greater engagement in the arts amongst males:

- Artists require high levels of participatory skills in order to gain the trust of, and build relationships with, groups of people with barriers to engaging in the arts. There is no evidence from this project to show that the gender of the participants or the artist, all things being equal, influences the quality of the engagement with groups.
- Young men were found to be both largely unaware, but crucially inspired by the opportunity to forge a career as an artist.
- Projects targeting male engagement may need to be marketed strategically in locations likely to attract male attention or with established non-arts groups populated by men.
- Although not unique to men, the involvement of a familiar intermediary such as a youth worker or case worker can reduce the barriers to young males or men with additional needs engaging and sustaining their involvement in the arts.
- Facilitating greater interaction amongst participants in longer-term projects between scheduled arts activities or meetings, for example through a WhatsApp group or closed Facebook group, can strengthen project and individual outcomes. This mechanism can also be used to make people aware of wider project developments or opportunities to participate.



Journeymen exhibition, credit: Phyllis Christopher

Evidence of progress against Theory of Change

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

The Brothers-in-Arts project provides further insight and knowledge through which to inform approaches to increase levels of participation in quality arts amongst men. Importantly the impact of the small scale work with multiple groups to date can be amplified through the process of developing and marketing the exhibition planned for late 2019 in order to encourage further participation across South east Northumberland.

Ambition: to involve local people

The approach to testing the findings of the initial research, informing project activity through taster events and the formation of the project steering groups has facilitated the involvement of men from across South East Northumberland to be involved in the development and delivery of the project on a variety of levels. The project has tested a range of co-design and co-production techniques to enable participants to shape a varied programme of activities and utilise new and existing skills to plan the final exhibition which can help to underpin future legacy activity.

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

Both participants and partners have highlighted a range of positive health and social outcomes which they attribute to their involvement in the project including increased confidence, reduced levels of anxiety and social exclusion and greater exposure to opportunities to make new friends to combat loneliness. Project participants recruited from Museum Northumberland bait's suite of arts for wellbeing projects reinforced the value of the arts in supporting their recovery from addictions and mental health problems, stressing both the value of involvement in strategic decisions within the steering group and working with other groups which are contributing to improving the well-being of local people.

'Four years ago, I tried to take my own life. It's really important to focus on something ... one thing. Art has changed my life. I want to take the opportunity to thank bait for giving me the opportunity to work with the local community and, hopefully to make a difference.'

(Participant)

Ambition: to leave a sustainable legacy of enhanced capacity, resources and infrastructure for the arts in south east Northumberland

The Brothers-in-Arts project has provided the foundations from which a legacy of skills, capacity, resources and infrastructure targeting increased male engagement in the for the arts in South East Northumberland can be developed. By building on the enthusiasm, skills and buy-in created through the project to date through the planning and management of the proposed touring exhibition, there is scope to generate both the interest, capacity and structure, for example within a new constituted group, to shape further targeted content aimed specifically at men across South East Northumberland.

'The exhibition will help people realise what art is. Art is life. It's about what you are'

(Participant)

Our Funders



Our Consortium



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