



Heart of the Hirst Committee
Image Mik Critchlow

Introduction

Museums Northumberland bait has increased the intensity and scope of community input to the delivery and management of programme outputs throughout the three Phases of delivery. This is directly in line with the programme's 10-year Vision:

'To create a long term increase in levels of arts engagement, driven by the creativity and ambition of people living in South East Northumberland, having a demonstrable effect on the well-being of local people and levels of social energy and activism within communities and the means to sustain those changes in the future.'

This process is echoed in the Theory of Change covering the programme which includes an ambition **'to involve local people'** and poses the related research question: **'to what extent, and in what ways, has the creativity and ambition of people living in South East Northumberland helped to steer and shape the programme?'**

This case study showcases Museums Northumberland bait's approach to engaging and embracing the input of local people in helping to shape programme delivery through collaborative decision making. It highlights successes, learning and good practice that can be used to inform delivery across a range of projects and programmes.

Context

Collaborative working between communities and a variety of professionals has become increasingly prevalent in the last 15-20 years or so in the public and voluntary sectors. Creative People and Places (CPP) including the Museums Northumberland bait programme, provides a framework of support to enable and empower people to engage in collaborative creative activities. Where effective, this approach has been found to result in more culturally relevant work through the blending of community voices with professional skills to effectively reflect the creativity, heritage and aspirations of local people and places.

Discussions on the use and benefits of collaborative working are often littered with contradictory or confusing language. For the purpose of this case study, we are defining collaborative working as the sharing of power, through decision making, between artists, creative practitioners, related professionals/organisations and communities in South East Northumberland. This approach should be used positively and effectively in order to design, plan and deliver creative work based on shared, and equally valued, contributions as part of artistic practice which is delivered 'with' communities, rather than 'for' or 'to' communities.

Decision making in practice

All aspects of project development will incorporate varying degrees and intensities of decision making between some or all of the partners engaged in the creative process. In respect of the Museums Northumberland bait programme, the evolving role of decision making can be seen across not only the two Phase 3 commissions¹, but also the wider work with supported groups and work with a variety of partners to support their creative projects.

Decision making channels

Decision making to help shape the Museums Northumberland bait programme from 2020 to 2022 has taken place in and through a combination of online and in person forums. This has been in line with COVID-19 safety guidelines and preferences of participants who may have been less likely to engage through face-to-face channels. However, whilst the accessibility of virtual channels such as Zoom have been exploited, the advantages of face-to-face interactions have also been maximised whenever possible. These include increased confidence to contribute to informal and often more organic discussions, alongside the overriding benefits of tackling the social isolation felt by many during lockdown.

¹ Close Knit is an animated film featuring a wide range of interviews with people who live in South East Northumberland alongside a series of beautiful handmade animations, created through workshops with local people. Further details, and a link to the film, can be found at <http://baittime.to/close-knit>

The Bellwether Project has been inspired by the environment and natural world in South East Northumberland. People have worked collectively alongside artists to produce a series of large-scale 'embroidered club patches' and photographic portraits to capture individual journeys and relationships with the natural world. Further details can be found at [Background to The Bellwether Project - Museums Northumberland](#).

Community collaboration

Collaboration between artists, project partners, the Museums Northumberland bait team and crucially, local communities, has been a consistent, yet evolving and developing feature of the programme since the development of the original bid document in 2012. Communities have been increasingly involved in innovative collaborative working to achieve shared goals and inform the development and delivery of the programme in each of its three phases.

The profile of decision makers has also evolved over time to increasingly reflect the four target groups for Phase 3 of the programme, (i.e. older people, young people, men and people with refugee status). Men continue to be underrepresented in decision making as is the case with participation overall, enjoying more isolated and specifically creative involvement compared to women who have been happier to get involved in multiple aspects of projects including decision making. Refugee families and young people's involvement increased as the programme was able to draw on partners including Northumberland College to encourage participation as COVID restrictions were removed.

***“We are such a variety of people so we are able to put our own spin on it”
(participant)***

More specifically in relation to shaping aspects of the creative journey, collaborative working practices have been increasingly used as the process underpinning the meaningful engagement of participants. This is reflected in the depth of the role of communities in helping to shape project activity. This has seen people engaged as not only decision makers in the planning, commissioning and delivery of specific projects, but in helping to assess the progress and shape the strategic direction of the programme through participation in Consortium meetings.

Decision making in the commissioning process

Phase 3 of the Museums Northumberland bait programme has benefited from the experience of collaborative artists recruited in Phase 2, with community members having a deeper and clearer role. Indeed, iterative improvements to guidance and support for people involved in agreeing artist briefs, shortlisting and interviewing artists has produced greater consistency and mutual respect and ultimately helped to ensure the appropriate recruitment of the right artists for each commission.

Decision making in Phase 3 of the programme has encompassed all aspects of the early project development journey. Local communities have worked alongside Museums Northumberland bait staff to help develop commission outlines, artist briefs, shortlist artists, interview them and inform final selection. Crucially however, the majority of this

process was undertaken in the shadow of COVID-19 restrictions which meant that the overall breadth and depth of involvement was restricted. For some potential decision makers, a lack of access to IT hardware, connectivity and data poverty limited the scope of their engagement, whilst others lost their key driver of face-to-face social interaction. In terms of decision making, the move to online channels enabled greater flexibility of access to the decision making process. However, the relative lack of intensity and frequency of engagement led to a practical imperative for the Museums Northumberland bait team to maintain momentum by driving the collaborative process forward in a spirit of 'shared power and responsibility'.

Decision making in project development

There is consensus that a project or artist brief is integral to shaping a project. A detailed or targeted brief with very specific parameters will drive the direction and nature of decision making and ultimately the content and focus of the creative work. Reflections on the evolving nature of the Phase 3 commissions, from the agreement of the brief (in conjunction with community representatives) to completion, highlighted the impact of a relatively open brief on the nature and influence of decision making on the creative process. Specifically, there was agreement that an open brief encouraged collaborative working, whilst a more specific brief would be more likely to stifle the role and impact of decision making.

“If you have got something very specific that’s being commissioned or whoever is commissioning it has a very clear idea of what they want, this wouldn’t work.”
(artist)

The design of a specific decision making group has also played a key role in the development of the Close Knit commission, through facilitation of a forum through which a cross section of participants played a part in helping to shape the direction and content of the work over two years.

“The direction of travel of the work is entirely informed and driven by whoever we’re working with.”
(artist)

“I feel listened to and involved”
(participant)

“The artists are great. I feel they’re giving us what we want and I’m getting out of it what I’ve wanted. I’ve never taken part in anything like this before and it’s been really good. It’s made me want to get involved in other things.”
(participant)

Whilst there are many examples of the sharing of power within the decision making process, there remains an appreciation of where specific partners are best placed to utilise their skills, knowledge and expertise. For example, whilst artists would have been open to sharing the process of finalising work on the commissions (subject to sufficient time and budget), participants were keen to maintain the boundaries between making decisions and putting specialised skills into practice to generate quality outputs.

***“Everyone sort of seemed to go ‘well now you kind of make it and finish it’”
(artist)***

***“They (community decision makers) have been obviously extremely important, but not just important, we’ve all been part of the jigsaw.”
(artist)***

However, this process is underpinned by mutual trust in both the quality of the input of participants, and ability of artists to meet expectations. Indeed, artists remarked that the scale of the shared and equitable ownership of the work created through the collaborative decision making approach increased the pressure they felt to meet expectations of what had become a truly joint commission. The enhanced relationship created as a result of the collaborative approach also ensured that greater emphasis was placed on the opportunity to share and discuss the evolving work with the group.

***“That’s the first time I’ve ever had experience of kind of offering it up and going, what do you reckon to this? Are we on the right track? Is this what you thought we were going to do? And if it isn’t, is it better than you thought or worse?”
(artist)***

***“The review was very important ... it almost felt at the end of that, we got permission to kind of crack on”
(artist)***

The work of the Museums Northumberland bait Creative Producers in not only facilitating connections to local networks, potential participants and creative partners but also encouraging engagement in the decision making process is vital. The role of locally-based artists and creative practitioners to maintain contact, develop strong relationships and sustain input to the creative process has also been integral to the success of commissions. This was especially important given the location of some of the key artists outside of the region and the limitations of virtual channels for more hands-on aspects of delivery.

***“There’s always an element of being led by the group. The creative producer role is really key - enabling us to feed into the sessions.”
(artist)***

Strategic decision making

Phase 3 has seen the scale and scope of the role of communities expand into participation in Consortium Board meetings. Crucially, this has both encompassed two-way discussions about progress across the two main commissions, but also provided community representatives with the opportunity to learn about, question and add value to areas of the broader programme.

Members of the community engaged in strategic discussions stated that they felt relaxed in their role and comfortable in absorbing and listening to different aspects of the programme. However, there was agreement that, whilst valuable, they did not enjoy the experience as much as discussions closer to the creative process, feeling less able to comment on more technical aspects of governance and management.

Outcomes and impact - what changed as a result?

The crucial aspect of work informed by collaborative decision making is the enhanced ownership of the creative outputs amongst participants. There was also a feeling that the quality of decision making, (i.e. in terms of knowledge and ownership) was enhanced by participants being actively involved in producing creative content. Maintaining decision making in between workshops also sustained momentum and involvement in commissions and projects.

***“We tried to keep Carole’s quote, ‘it’s not about buildings, it’s about us’
in our minds all the time”
(artist)***

***“The artists are very aware of each of us as individuals and understand us”
(participant)***

Participants in the decision making process highlighted growth in their individual and shared confidence linked to their involvement in the project and creative discussions undertaken with a range of different people. This contributed to enhanced willingness and ability to contribute to different and potentially more complex topics, (e.g. strategic discussions with the Consortium Board) as well as reporting positive wellbeing impacts linked to more frequent social interaction.

***“I liked to be able to switch off my camera and concentrate. You’ve then got the confidence when you’re face-to-face. But you did also miss out on someone walking around to give you advice.”
(participant)***

***“Creating a group of likeminded people - we’re starting to form a community ourselves”
(participant)***

***“The only way I coped in lockdown was to be challenged to keep going”
(participant)***

***“bait gives us an opportunity to learn from other people. It’s been so interesting meeting students and seeing their perspective”
(participant)***

There are also observed residual and longer-term benefits of increased confidence to shape creative activities within the groups supported by Museums Northumberland bait in Phase 3 and earlier years of the programme. Indeed a range of organisations including community groups such as Heart of the Hirst and a number of arts groups recognised the benefits in terms of increased self-confidence and knowledge to inform their activities with tapering intervention from a range of professional partners.

***“People have really blossomed through the process”
(artist)***

***“Collaborative working works well and we’re keen to take it forward now we know there are other groups like us that we could work with”
(participant)***

A collaborative decision making process, especially when employed in conjunction with a broad brief, will typically make it more difficult to predict how either the approach or content of a commission will evolve. There will be times when artists and creative partners become more involved, providing confidence, guidance, expertise and therefore impetus, and others when the community take the lead and ownership. This process does however require a critical mass of time which CPP and specifically Museum Northumberland bait staff have learnt from earlier phases of the programme.

Indeed, when following an approach with a strong emphasis on power sharing, professional partners including artists and commissioners will need to be open to accommodating a flexible, non-linear creative journey with a healthy approach to risk taking and ability to learn and adapt to challenge. Although it is difficult to assess how different approaches would have changed project development, there was consensus that the broad approach to project development and wider programming during Phase 3 has been both liberating and pleasurable.

A commission utilising a strong collaborative approach can have wider implications for the artists involved, especially where it differs from past practice. Indeed, whilst not being of detriment to the quality of the final work, the shared aspects of the work place greater emphasis on the quality of the process of engagement encouraged through CPP. This, in turn, may see this work categorised or marketed differently whilst opening up different avenues of future work.

“I’m not quite sure where it sits within my practice. It’s endlessly interesting. There’s a sort of power relationship that you have as an artist. It’s just fascinating that you don’t own this thing or you can’t put your name to it entirely.”
(artist)

“It’s been really great. It’s totally transformed my practice. I think just the way that I perceive my position with everybody else. I am now somewhere else on that Venn diagram now.”
(artist)

Moreover, the impact of the approach has changed the perception of artists of the value and viability of incorporating equitable decision making, at all stages of the work from interview through to final showing, into future work.

“I’m thinking about it feeding into other things that I might be doing or whether I can apply for things that are to do with co-production. It’s a shift in how people can create work”
(artist)

“We’ve tried to take comments on board. I’ve never done that before and I think that will definitely inform our work going forward.”
(artist)

Lessons learnt

Key areas of learning which can inform ongoing and similar activities include:

- For the greatest impacts to be achieved, decision making should incorporate the views, skills and expertise that all parties have to offer on an equitable basis. The prerequisites underpinning effective and equitable decision making within CPP include:
 - Achieving representation from target groups.
 - Recognising people as assets.
 - Ensuring that any barriers to participation, (e.g. language, confidence in speaking

- in a group setting and potential ‘dominant voices’, confidence and ability to use virtual channels like Zoom) in decision making are minimised or ideally removed.
- Reducing or removing the boundaries or power balance, (i.e. relative experience, confidence in informing practice etc.) between people typically paid to deliver products and services and those in receipt of them.
 - The quality of the decision making process can be enhanced by:
 - Developing respectful and reciprocal relationships.
 - Recognising, using and developing people’s skills, experiences and local, subject or sector-specific knowledge.
 - Participants gaining in confidence through online interaction to contribute to larger, face-to-face forums later in the project process.
 - Knowledge gained from being involved in the physical co-production of work.
 - Encouraging peer support to achieve maximum involvement and input.
 - Increased participation (numbers and frequency) from using hybrid engagement channels based on the learning from COVID-19 working practices.
 - People involved in creative delivery can utilise their knowledge of the project to help achieve successful outcomes through more informed decision making.
 - With reference to the impact of COVID-19 on people’s time and inclination to volunteer their time, feedback from participants revealed that some people will need to focus their involvement on specific areas of interest or skillsets to avoid overload and maximise enjoyment.
 - Younger people are more likely to engage in decision making processes when there are clear and visible links to their current activities, (e.g. college work) and future life chances.
 - For artists and creative practitioners with limited experience of utilising ‘true’ decision making as part of their collaborative practice, the process can challenge and inform their work across the areas of:
 - How to market the work as ‘their own’.
 - Relinquishing control of artistic work.
 - Recognising a view of quality² which embraces the quality of engagement with communities as much as traditional views of the quality of the artistic product or final output.
 - How to incorporate collaborative decision making within projects and for clients with limited experience of commissioning and recognising the benefits of the approach.
 - With a caveat linked to the impact of COVID-19 the depth of decision making witnessed through the Museums Northumberland bait programme requires investment and flexibility in time for outcomes to develop ‘naturally’. Shorter or less flexible time frames will usually require a greater direct input from professionals in order to drive progress and meet deadlines.

² Museums Northumberland bait has developed a Quality Framework to help assess the quality of a project in terms of engagement and artistic outputs. Further details can be found via [article - Bait \(baittime.to\)](#)

- Given that decision making can shape the approach and content of collaborative work, thought needs to be given to the level of detail in the brief and the timing/cut-off point for decision making prior to the final work being agreed.
- Multiple opportunities to test progress across a delivery timeframe are invaluable to achieving a mutually agreed success.
- The learning from the shift to online working during COVID-19 has made quality collaborative work with artists based elsewhere in the country easier for commissioners, artists and participants. Indeed, a relative lack of local knowledge places greater value and demand for input from local people.
- There is value in maintaining regular contact, ideally face-to-face, with community representatives throughout a project to encourage participation in the decision making process based on trusted relationships, sustained engagement and reactions to body language which may be missed on virtual channels.
- A variety of approaches, (e.g. groups and one-to-one sessions, online and face-to-face) and persistence are required to engage some groups, organisations or individuals who will be harder to involve due to their own time commitments and barriers to engagement.

Summary

Museums Northumberland bait has championed, explored and evolved collaborative decision making to reinforce its objectives of supporting local communities to play an increasingly significant role in the planning and development of the programme. The approach taken to support decision making based on community-led, yet pragmatic planning, has contributed to the collaborative development of two successful commissions in phase three, and supported groups to sustain creative activities by helping to increase their capacity to fund and deliver a range of autonomous projects.



Members of the Close Knit decision making group interviewed on stage at the Close Knit launch. Image Jason Thompson / The Bigger Picture

Wavehill: social and economic research

- Wales office: 21 Alban Square, Aberaeron, Ceredigion, SA46 0DB (registered office)
- West England office: 2-4 Park Street, Bristol, BS1 5HS
- North of England office: Milburn House, Dean Street, Newcastle, NE1 1LE
- London office: 52 Cecile Park, Crouch End, London, N8 9AS

Contact details:

Tel: 01545 571711

Email: wavehill@wavehill.com

Twitter: @wavehilltweets

More information:

www.wavehill.com

<https://twitter.com/wavehilltweets>

© Wavehill: social and economic research.

This report is subject to copyright. The authors of the report (Wavehill: social and economic research) should be acknowledged in any reference that is made to its contents.

Report authors:

Andy Parkinson, Jamie Buttrick & Sarah Usher

Any questions in relation to this report should be directed in the first instance to Andy Parkinson (andy.parkinson@wavehill.com) 01545 571711.

Date of document: June 2022

Client contact:

Rachel Adam radam@museumsnorthumberland.org.uk