

Creative Connectors



Images:

Top left, Sheila Biggs, Creative Connector at Newbiggin Learning Hive credit: Jason Thompson

Top right, Susan MacKellar, Creative Connector (right) with Eunice Lawson and Enid Dunbar from Bedlington Community Centre credit: Sophie Sutherland

Bottom left, Isla Haddow, Creative Connector credit: Groundworks NE and Cumbria

Bottom right, Creative Connectors' Paul McDougal and Danielle Burn in Newbiggin credit: Sophie Sutherland

The Creative Connectors programme was established by bait in 2014 and developed with partners across South East Northumberland to identify freelance opportunities for passionate local people to develop skills and work experience in the cultural sector.

The intention of the programme was to develop the essential skills required to build and sustain arts participation by supporting the development of emerging artists and arts managers. To date the Creative Connectors programme has supported seven local people who have provided a bridge between their communities and the arts whilst also supporting bait partners in delivering a range of arts activities and projects.

Project Information

Project aims

The concept of a Creative Connector originated from work carried out during the development phase of the bait programme. The pilot Creative Connector role was developed to act as a conduit between the project, the general public and those taking part in activities and was designed to support consultation and intelligence gathering. Information gathered by the Creative Connectors in the development phase directly informed the business plan for bait and proved immensely valuable.

Building on this, the bait business plan had an aspiration to create five Creative Connector roles with an intention to develop five new roles annually. Having gained experience, the Creative Connectors would then lead on projects of their own developing from emerging artist to artists with an aspiration for them to deliver areas of the programme.

The key aims of the Creative Connectors programme are to:

- Develop a sustainable model which invests in the people of South East Northumberland and builds a lasting creative legacy that enriches the lives of the wider community;
- Provide an opportunity for emerging artists/arts managers from South East Northumberland to enter a freelance role and act as a conduit between the bait programme and the community that it serves;
- Create an innovative training and mentoring model for Creative Connectors which considers creative industry standards, skills gaps and best practice;
- Provide authentic industry experience through professional mentoring, direct delivery and wider creative industry experience;
- Support Creative Connectors in building confidence and self-esteem; and
- Identify progression routes within the creative industries for Creative Connectors.

Target participants

The Creative Connector opportunities are open to anyone living in South East Northumberland aged over 18 years. The programme has been developed to encourage people from diverse backgrounds to work with and within their communities. Freelance brief descriptions reflect the personal attributes and skills needed to fulfil the activities and appreciate that people bring transferable skills and experience to support the role. No qualification levels have been set unless essential to the delivery of the role. The Creative Connector opportunities have been publicised through a range of channels including: word of mouth; volunteer organisations and services; advertising; social media; press releases; community organisations and existing and established groups.

Between September 2014 and September 2015 the programme has recruited seven local people to the Creative Connector roles, including five women and two men. Ages have ranged from early 20s upward to early 50s.

Project partners

The key partners in the project included:

- **bait** Creative People and Places programme as lead delivery partner. The programme is

led by bait's Creative Skills Development Manager, **Lesley Wood**.

- A network of partners have worked with Creative Connectors to support the delivery of their arts projects including: **Bedlington Community Centre; Escape Family Support; Northern Learning Trust; ISIS Arts, Ashington Children's Centre, Northern Butterflies, Helix Arts, Headway Arts and Cramlington Voluntary Youth Project (CVYP)**.

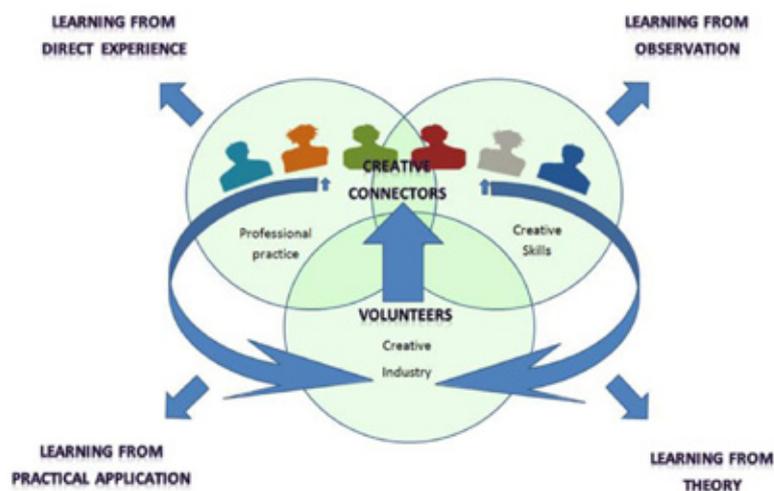
Project activities

Project activities have focused on providing Connectors with direct hands-on experience and access to industry relevant training and accreditation. The Connectors have delivered the following activities:

- Audience engagement (e.g. Bedlington Community Centre)
- Creative support to artists (e.g. Ashington Children's Centre)
- Project support (Artists Rooms)
- Project management and support (e.g. Haalin' the Lines)
- AQA accreditations (e.g. Escape Family Support)
- Skills development (e.g. Newbiggin Learning Hive)
- Event support (e.g. CVYP young carers project)
- Go sees and visit co-ordination (e.g. Newbiggin Learning Hive)

Stories on some of the projects above feature in issues 2 and 3 of bait time to celebrate magazines, www.baittime.to/review

Using an experiential learning process, Creative Connectors have been supported to develop their skills and understanding through direct delivery across a range of arts activities, by shadowing more experienced practitioners and modelling practice, through targeted training opportunities and through practical application. The model has provided support and encouragement for Connectors to identify their own learning style in order to build an understanding of how to develop and support their own learning. The pedagogical approach developed to support the Connectors is summarised below:



Creative Connector briefs have been developed to offer opportunities to people who may not

traditionally have seen the arts and creative sector as a career path. Each freelance role has been tailored to the Connector based on their level of experience, their potential for development and what they would like to gain from their experience.

Key challenges

Given their diverse background, each of the Creative Connectors has required a personalised programme of skills development support and mentoring. The experience of bait's Creative Skills Development Manager in coaching, training and arts development has been pivotal to identifying and meeting the learning needs of each Connector. However, the approach has intentionally provided space for the Connectors to develop their own style and professional resilience in order to avoid over-dependence on the bait team.

The creation of a mentoring model has highlighted the importance of identifying established artists that have the appropriate mix of skills to mentor the Connectors effectively. Future delivery of the programme may explore the need for mentoring training in order to expand the pool of established artists able to mentor future Connectors and emerging artists.

The Connectors have worked with a wide range of partners across a series of arts projects. It has been important to ensure that partners have clarity on the parameters of the programme, the roles of the Creative Connectors and their responsibilities for supporting their learning and development. On occasion this has necessitated intervention by the bait team to ensure that both the partner organisation and Creative Connector are clear and comfortable with their respective roles.

Outcomes and impact - what changed as a result?

Project outcomes

Of the four prototype Creative Connectors in place during the development phase of the bait programme, two have continued to work in the programme on a freelance basis. The other two have taken up full time employment elsewhere using the skills developed through their involvement. In its first year programme has recruited and supported seven Creative Connectors. The pool of Connectors has undertaken 13 roles with partner organisations encompassing a range of arts activities and delivery contexts.

The industry relevant training programme delivered by bait has been comprehensive, covering the skills and knowledge required to both deliver and manage arts activities (for example safeguarding, risk assessment and project management) as well as skills required to operate effectively as a freelancer (for example contracting, responding to tender opportunities, budgeting, tax and marketing).

Project impact

The Creative Connectors have been supported to use reflective logs to enable them to support their professional development and improve the quality of their future practice. This approach has enabled the Connectors to identify and direct their learning and support needs whilst also providing an opportunity for them to reflect on their experience and recognise their achievements. This approach has been valued by the Connectors as a key element of their skills development and progression.

“The reflective model has been a useful thing for me - sometimes I think that you only realise about something

once you think about it. In life I don't think that you give yourself time to think about things very often and so this is a healthy process."

Paul McDougal

The combination of direct hands-on delivery and training has supported Connectors to both strengthen their existing skills and acquire new skills. This in turn has developed their confidence to seek out and realise new opportunities within the arts and cultural sector.

"I feel that I have learned a lot. I have become more confident in my ability to motivate a group of individuals and have helped them to bring out their creativity and confidence."

"I had thought before I got involved in the Learning Hive project that once I had done my degree that this was where I was going to go with it.... I think that the project has reinforced that and now I know that this is actually where I want to be. I think that I have a lot to learn about it but until you actually do it and get involved in it you don't know if you can actually do it."

Sheila Biggs

The recruitment of Creative Connectors with different backgrounds, including arts and non-arts career experience (for example community development experience), has helped to provide new ideas, perspectives and insight to individual projects and the broader bait programme. The Connectors have been able to draw on their own social and work-related networks to extend the reach into local communities and encourage and facilitate participation for new audiences.

"Having a local person connected to bait, I believe gave us an instant 'in' and credibility with groups who didn't know us previously."

ISIS Arts

They have also been able to gain experience of working with different groups within the community. For some this has involved, in the context of funded arts projects, working for the first time with people with drug and alcohol addiction, adults with learning disabilities or children and young people.

"I feel that I have developed personally, especially with regard to adapting to new and different situations... It has

felt great to work alongside so many different audiences and groups and get a sense of contentment and feel that I have influenced and had an effect on peoples wellbeing.”

Isla Haddow

Feedback from the Creative Connectors has highlighted the value of feeling part of a wider team, in particular for Connectors with previous experience of working as a freelancer. The Connectors have welcomed the opportunity to network with other artists and also establish links with a range of partner organisations both in South East Northumberland and beyond.

The capacity, energy, enthusiasm and skills of the Creative Connectors have been recognised and valued across the range of bait partners and has supported the effective delivery of a range of projects commissioned through the bait programme. This has opened up freelance opportunities for some of the Connectors with six arts/ community organisations working across the North East¹, thus enabling them to expand their portfolio of work and gain further experience.

“It was such a success working for Bedlington Community Centre that they have employed me one morning a week as a Marketing and Events Coordinator.”

Susan MacKellar

Legacy

- The legacy of the Creative Connectors programme is multi-faceted. Through the opportunities provided the Creative Connectors have gained valuable experience across a number of roles. The combination of hands-on delivery experience, development of networking skills and training has enhanced their career prospects and ability to compete in a freelance market.

- The project briefs delivered by the Creative Connectors have been established as time-limited freelance contracts. Some 43% of those involved in creative industries are self-employed so freelance contracts mirror a significant section of the industry². As such, the Connectors have gained valuable experience, have built their portfolio of work and are in a stronger position to operate on a freelance basis across South East Northumberland and beyond.

- Several Connectors have already progressed to new opportunities within the arts sector working with partner organisations within and beyond South East Northumberland. The confidence, resilience, motivation and relevant skills acquired through their Creative Connector role will provide a lasting legacy in terms of their future career pathways.

- The programme has provided bait with a potentially scalable model and suite of training resources to support future cohorts of emerging artists and art managers. The positive feedback received from partner organisations is likely to help to expand the number of opportunities available to future Connectors and potentially secure match funding to resource the time-limited freelance contracts. Indeed there is already evidence of partner organisations making provision for Creative Connectors as part of funding applications to resource future arts activity in South East Northumberland.

- Partner organisations and experienced artists have also gained experience and skills in

¹ Bedlington Community Centre, ISIS Arts, ARC Stockton, Helix Arts, Headway Arts, Northumberland Arts Development

² <http://ccskills.org.uk/supporters/blog/freelancing-and-the-future-of-creative-jobs>

mentoring and supporting emerging artists and arts managers, thus providing greater capacity to support future cohorts of Connectors.

- The work of the Creative Connectors has also been influential in shaping the delivery models and approaches of partner organisations, in particular in engaging local communities in arts activities. As such the Creative Connectors programme can provide a lasting contribution to one of the fundamental objectives of the Creative People and Places programme, namely to sustain arts participation for previously disengaged communities.

Lessons learnt

Key areas of learning which can inform ongoing and similar activities across south east Northumberland include:

- Identifying the best possible opportunities for learning and skills development has ensured that Creative Connectors work with bait at optimum times to develop their skills and understanding. The use of an experiential learning model has ensured that the Connectors have benefited from hands on practical freelance experience and learning based around live projects.

- The induction process for successful new applicants has provided an opportunity for Creative Connectors to develop a shared understanding and ethos for the bait programme. It has also ensured that the Connectors feel part of a team.

- It is important when developing a mentoring model to assess the extent to which established artists working in the area have the requisite skills, competencies and experience to mentor effectively. Where necessary resources may be required to expand the network of established artists that are able to act as mentors.

- Partner organisations utilising the Connectors as part of time-limited freelance contracts need to have clarity on the parameters of the Connector role and their own responsibilities in supporting their development. Although a framework of support has been provided through bait, the Connectors are afforded space to develop and to make and learn from their mistakes. Partner organisations need to recognise and take account of this as part of their project management approach.

- One of the objectives for the programme is to maximise the progression opportunities available for emerging and early stage creative and cultural professionals. Maintaining a focus on progression is important to avoid any dependency on the bait team and ensure that the Connectors develop the industry specific and transferable skills to seek out and follow career pathways.

Replicability

The following are highlighted as top tips for replicating this project:

- Provide sufficient space for emerging and early stage creative and cultural professionals to develop, learn and reflect. Building in opportunities for reflection has been an important process for the Connectors to learn from their experience and also learn from their mistakes. Reflection has helped to provide the Connectors with deeper learning by looking at situations through a different lens and also an opportunity to recognise their own progression.

- Create authentic opportunities for emerging and early stage creative and cultural professionals to gain experience on live projects working with a range of partner organisations. The use of time-limited freelance contracts mirrors the realities of work for many artists and art managers working in the sector and helps to build the confidence and skills to compete in a competitive marketplace.

- Networking is an essential component of the programme. Enabling and encouraging the Connectors to build their own networks with partner organisations and artists considerably improves their prospects of operating effectiveness on a freelance basis.

Evidence of progress against Theory of Change

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

The programme has been developed to encourage people from diverse backgrounds to work with and within their communities. As evidenced in the feedback from partner organisations the Creative Connectors have been valuable in extending links to and engaging local people in the bait programme. The Connectors have also supported projects to achieve high quality standards in relation to their product, creative process and quality of experience for participants.

Ambition: to involve local people

The Creative Connectors programme has recruited and supported seven local people with roles open to anyone living in South East Northumberland aged over 18 years. The roles have been accessible to candidates without the need for a higher level qualification such as a degree or masters but instead have valued wider experience and transferable skills. The bait business plan includes a commitment to create five Creative Connector roles per year to expand the opportunities for local people to develop and/or further their careers in the arts sector.

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

The Creative Connectors have completed 13 roles with partner organisations across the bait programme. This has included work with a diverse range of participants including people with drug and alcohol addiction, adults with learning disabilities and children and young people. As such the Connectors have contributed towards the successful delivery of a range of bait commissioned arts activities that have been able to demonstrate the benefits to well-being of quality arts activity.

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

Through the provision of training and work experience the Creative Connectors programme has built the capacity, skills, knowledge and experience of local people in delivering and managing arts activities. Whilst not all of the Connectors may remain active within the arts sector, those that do will continue to provide a resource for bait, partner organisations and local communities and support efforts to build and sustain arts participation across South East Northumberland. Continuation of the programme will expand the pool of Creative Connectors and create an alumni network which has the potential to mentor and support future cohorts of emerging artists and arts managers.

Partner organisations and experienced artists have gained experience and skills in mentoring thus increasing the local capacity to support emerging artists and arts managers. The work of the Creative Connectors has also been influential in shaping the delivery models and approaches of partner organisations. This is contributing to the development of a sustainable legacy in terms of the approaches used to successfully build and sustain arts participation within local communities.

Researched and written by Consilium Research as part of the evaluation of bait (2015)
info@consiliumresearch.co.uk www.consiliumresearch.co.uk

Our Funders



Our Consortium

