

# Museums Northumberland bait - Creative Connectors Legacy

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

## Introduction

**The Creative Connectors programme was established by Museums Northumberland 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. The Creative Connector programme ended in October 2016 at the end of Phase 1 of the Museums Northumberland bait programme. This case study presents an overview of the legacy from the programme based on feedback from five local people supported through the programme.**

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## Project information

### Project aims

The concept of a Creative Connector originated from work carried out during the development phase of the Museums Northumberland bait programme. The pilot Creative Connector role was developed to act as a conduit between the Museums Northumberland bait programme, the general public and those taking part in activities and was designed to support consultation and intelligence gathering. The intention was that having gained experience, the Creative Connectors would then lead on projects of their own developing from emerging artists to artists, with an aspiration for them to deliver areas of the programme. Key aims of the Creative Connectors programme were 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 Museums Northumberland bait programme and the community that it serves;
- 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 were open to anyone living in South East Northumberland aged over 18 years. Between September 2014 and September 2015 the programme recruited seven local people to the Creative Connector roles, including five women and two men. Their ages ranged from early 20s to early 50s.

### Project partners

- **Museums Northumberland bait** Creative People and Places programme as lead delivery partner
- A network of partners 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, Action for Children** and **Cramlington Voluntary Youth Project (CVYP)**.

### Progression and professional development

The progression routes and pathways for each of the Creative Connectors moving from emerging to more experienced artists has differed. Only one of the Connectors is currently working on a full-time basis as a freelance cultural practitioner whilst the others have continued their freelance roles alongside other paid employment in non-arts sectors. For some the lack of security around the number of funding opportunities or commissions, in particular across South East Northumberland, has understandably created a degree of apprehension of moving away from other paid roles. This is not unique to the Creative Connectors with many freelance artists combining arts and non-arts roles as part of a portfolio career path.

All of the Connectors have maintained their own practice and are continuing efforts to identify commissions and funding opportunities to enable them to deliver work with communities. The training and development undertaken as part of their Creative Connector role has provided a valuable platform from which to progress their freelance work. Combined, the Connectors have worked across a range of commissions following their engagement with the Creative Connector programme, both within South East Northumberland and further afield. Examples have included:

Museums Northumberland bait	External programmes and projects
Rainbow's End project - visual arts project involving people over 65yrs	Lost Souls project - celebrating sacrifices made by the rescue services in Newbiggin
From the Ashes - drama and creative writing commission in South East Northumberland	Remembered project - World War One Remembrance project
Open Door - a project working with refugees resettling in Northumberland	Putting Southwick on the Map
Co-delivery of a CPP workshop for the British Council in Moscow	Peregrini Landscape Partnership.
	Delaval Dialogues- community participation programme as part of the HLF funded development project at Seaton Delaval Hall

Delivery of their freelance roles over the last three years has helped the Connectors to build on the skills developed through the initial programme as well as highlighting areas for further professional development, including preparing and submitting funding bids, budgeting, effective networking and managing sub-contractors. The skills and knowledge gained through connections with the Museums Northumberland bait programme, including facilitation skills, session delivery, communication and risk-assessment, have helped to build the confidence of the Connectors in pursuing freelance opportunities either linked to or independent from the Creative People & Places programme. Experiential learning was identified as central to their professional development and as such their relative success or otherwise of securing freelance commissions strongly influenced their progress as a freelance practitioner.

***“The practical experience of working in a freelance capacity within the Creative Connector role was mixed. My first project placement, I was able to really add value with scope to curate and plan a photography exhibition, it both made use of my skills and experience and gave me opportunity to grow creative context and gave me some stretch. For other projects, it could feel like you were a spare pair of hands.”***

Two of the Connectors specifically referenced the value of their subsequent involvement in the Make Art Happen project delivered by Helix Arts, which is a training programme for community and voluntary organisations who want to produce their own arts residencies or festivals.

The training delivered through the programme sessions includes artist recruitment, marketing, financial control, production, evaluation, fundraising and sustainability. This helped to provide them with an understanding of the development and delivery of a community-based arts project from conception to final evaluation. One of the Connectors suggested that gaining experience in the full project cycle was an area where further support and guidance would be helpful.

On reflection the Creative Connectors project has provided them with a range of skills and experience that had supported their ongoing development and work as a freelance artist.

Of particular value were the following:

- Building confidence
- Developing session plans and risk assessment
- Professional collaboration
- Establishing networks with other artists, community organisations and commissioners
- Group work and facilitation
- Contracting and contract management
- Delivery and planning of workshops
- Self-management

There is increasing interest in the support needs of freelance creative practitioners. Research by the Creative Industries Federation<sup>1</sup> on Creative Freelancers, for example, highlights that of the creative workers in the sector, 47% are self-employed, compared with 15% across the workforce as whole. One of the recommendations outlined in the research is for government to support an independent UK-wide virtual hub which signposts existing business advice, maps local support services, and facilitates peer-to-peer mentoring for creative entrepreneurs.

### Key challenges

A number of challenges have been encountered by the Creative Connectors since their involvement in the programme:

- One of the main challenges has been the ability of the Connectors to secure sufficient commissions to enable them to progress their aspiration to work as a freelance artist. A common theme was the difficulty experienced by the Connectors in knowing where to seek out commissions<sup>2</sup> or an expectation from some organisations or commissioners that they would work for free, in particular in supporting community groups to submit funding applications to relevant funders and commissioners<sup>3</sup>. For some, a lack of confidence or experience of responding to advertised commissions has contributed to their uncertainty around whether they could develop a sustainable career as a freelance artist.

***“My involvement in the cultural sector, other than my own practice, has been voluntary, I am employed full time and my schedule makes it difficult to make time/commit to other projects.”***

- All of the Connectors are actively developing their own practice, however the absence of affordable studio space across South East Northumberland was highlighted as a barrier to their progression. The majority of artists were working from home and this could often be isolating as well as creating difficulties in showcasing their work and/or hosting professional meetings).

Sharing studio space with other freelance artists was highlighted as desirable as this helped to share the costs (and risk) associated with taking on a commercial lease but also because it had the potential to facilitate collaboration and peer mentoring.

- A further theme highlighted by the Connectors was the absence of opportunities within

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<sup>1</sup> Creative Industries Federation (2017)-‘ Creative Freelancers’.

<sup>2</sup> Whilst some of the Connectors referenced [Arts Jobs](#) which is managed by Arts Council England or [Curator Space](#), others were unclear where opportunities were posted.

<sup>3</sup> This has been highlighted more broadly by freelance artists. See for example <https://www.theguardian.com/small-business-network/2017/may/18/all-work-and-no-pay-creative-industries-freelancers-are-exploited>

South East Northumberland. Whilst some of the Connectors have an interest in working with communities outside of South East Northumberland, due to home circumstances, this wasn't always possible or of interest for others. However, given that South East Northumberland is a small geographical area it is unlikely that there will be sufficient freelance opportunities for the Connectors in the footprint of the Museums Northumberland bait area. In practice the majority of freelance practitioners work across the wider North East region and beyond.

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## **Outcomes and impact - what changed as a result?**

### **Legacy**

The Creative Connectors programme has helped to build confidence and skills of local people from across South East Northumberland who aspired to work as freelance artists. Whilst the programme provided a foundation of learning from which each of the Connectors has been able to develop professionally, a range of factors have influenced the extent to which they have, to date, been able to fulfil their ambition of working full time as a freelance artist.

These include a change in their personal circumstances (including, for example, a family bereavement or providing care for a family member), a challenging funding climate associated with continuing austerity and budgetary constraints and a perceived lack of opportunities in their local communities.

However, whilst some of the Connectors have experienced challenges, others have been able to seize opportunities to progress their freelance role.

***“I started my own studios, took on an old taxi office and converted into two studios and look to develop the middle space as a workshop/exhibition space where I also look to offer arts award. I looked to the creative connector role to help me to take this forward and it has to some degree.”***

***“Without the Creative Connectors role I don't think I would be an artist now.”***

### **Lessons learnt**

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

- Whilst some of the Connectors had maintained links with Museums Northumberland bait others reported that they hadn't had any ongoing contact since the completion of the programme. There was an expectation for some that Museums Northumberland bait would have had a stronger role in signposting them to commissioning opportunities or had a continuing role in supporting their transition to becoming a freelance artist. Whilst there is merit in exploring the potential to keep in touch with the alumni of the Creative Connectors programme, it is also important for the Connectors to build their own resilience, networks and freelance practice in what is a competitive environment for artists.
- Several of the Connectors reported difficulties in engaging with other artists, in particular due to a lack of artists networks across South East Northumberland. In the short term there is potential for Museums Northumberland bait to consider facilitating networking events of freelance artists and arts organisations, albeit that these would need to be self-sustaining over the longer-term. Signposting to existing online networks may also prove helpful

including for example the [ArtWorks-U](#) networking and support group<sup>4</sup>.

- A couple of the Connectors expressed interest in receiving support from a more experienced artist mentor, including for example opportunities to shadow their practice. This was highlighted as potentially valuable in helping them to develop their practice and also gaining insight into the realities of working as a freelance practitioner.

***“One element that is still missing is perhaps the support and mentoring to put your own project together from scratch.”***

## **Replicability**

The following are highlighted as top tips for replicating activities to support local people in progressing from emerging artist to freelance practitioners.

- Through their involvement in the programme the Creative Connectors gained experience of working with a range of arts organisations. These organisations regularly engage freelance practitioners to work across a range of commissions. As the Creative Connectors programme ended in October 2016, arts and cultural sector organisations across South East Northumberland and the wider region could support local people wishing to develop careers as freelance practitioners in the sector by offering shadowing and informal mentoring opportunities.
- There are continuing professional development opportunities which may assist the Creative Connectors in securing future work as a freelance practitioner. Examples include [Arts Award Adviser Training](#)<sup>5</sup>. Barriers to accessing these opportunities include an awareness of where and when the training is provided and also the cost of accessing the training. The [Developing Your Creative Practice Fund \(DYCP\)](#), administered by Arts Council England, can provide opportunities for independent creative practitioners across South East Northumberland to develop their practice, which in turn can help them to secure paid roles and forge a sustainable career in the sector.
- Given the challenge that several Connectors have experienced in identifying suitable and affordable studio space, along with a desire to collaborate with other artists, local partners including Northumberland County Council and the respective Town Councils, could consider exploring potential spaces across South East Northumberland that can encourage artists to make the transition from working at home to a dedicated studio space.
- There are models of delivering a professional development offer for artists and local people from other CPP areas. In the North West the four CPPs of Super Slow Way, Heart of Glass, LeftCoast and Creative Scene, were involved in the co-development of a pilot [Faculty of Social Arts Practice](#). The Faculty was a dedicated creative learning initiative for artists and creatives living and working in the North West of England. It has been able to nurture a number of aspiring artists to raise their awareness and knowledge of socially engaged arts practices.
- It helped to increase the local arts offer with members continuing their work in local communities. The Faculty also supported the professional development of local artists and practitioners, enabling them to develop their artistic practice, practical skills, critical thinking and social networks in the region. The programme has helped the four CPPs to develop a deeper understanding of the artistic and creative practitioners in their area.
- The ArtWorks Creative Practitioners Training programme, delivered in 2016 as a partnership programme involving West Lothian Council, Perth & Kinross Council and Falkirk and Stirling Council's (Forth Valley Creative Learning), also presents a potentially useful model. The

programme provided training to a range of established and emerging artists working in participatory setting including a three-day professional development course designed to provide artists with another ‘string to their bow’ thus making them more employable as well as supporting artists to be confident to find new approaches to teaching and learning. The programme also worked with employers/commissioners to improve their understanding of contracting an artist and/or creative practitioners.



Jane Sutcliffe, Creative Connector and Lyn Kileen, Artist, credit: Jason Thompson



Artist Sheila Biggs with her work at the Open Door Exhibition, credit: Jason Thompson

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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 programme was developed to encourage people from diverse backgrounds to work with and within their communities. It is evident that the Creative Connectors have been involved in supporting and/or leading a number of arts events and activities across South East Northumberland. Their role has helped to engage local people in a range of quality arts activities and using their local knowledge to help strengthen the design and delivery of these works.

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

The Creative Connectors programme recruited and supported seven local people. The progression routes and pathways for each of the Creative Connectors moving from emerging to more experienced artists has differed and as such their capacity to undertake future freelance roles is unclear. However, several have been active in delivering a range of freelance creative assignments across South East Northumberland and further afield.

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

The Creative Connectors have completed freelance assignments with a range of partner organisations beyond their period of professional development support from Museums Northumberland bait. This has included work with a diverse range of participants which has helped to build their respective skills and confidence in participatory arts approaches. The Connectors have continued to contribute towards the successful delivery of a range of 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 aimed to build the capacity, skills, knowledge and experience of local people in delivering and managing arts activities. Not all of the Connectors have remained active within the arts sector due to a range of personal and professional reasons. The challenging funding environment has clearly influenced the frequency and range of freelance commissions available across South East Northumberland and the wider region. These challenges are not unique for the alumni of the Creative Connectors programme.

However, two of the Connectors have progressed to secure paid freelance contracts within a number of Museums Northumberland bait projects. Further support may be required to encourage and enable the Connectors to maintain their professional development and ensure that their capacity and skills are effectively utilised to support meaningful arts participation across the CPP area. This responsibility falls more broadly to the range of organisations within the arts and cultural sector across Northumberland and the wider region.

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#### Our Funders



#### Our Consortium

Researched and written by Wavehill as part of the evaluation of bait (2019)  
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