



The Close Knit team
Image Jason Thompson

Introduction

Museums Northumberland bait has worked with individuals, organisations and a range of artists and creative practitioners throughout three Phases of delivery. This work has provided both participants and artists alike with the opportunity to engage with and deliver a range of art forms and creative approaches to delivery. This has been achieved with varying degrees of community input to the design and production process.

This is underpinned by 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 increase levels of quality arts participation with a related question to explore the way in which long term change has been effected.

This case study explores the creative journeys that people have been on as a result of interaction with the Museums Northumberland bait programme. It assesses the impact on individuals working directly with artists as well as groups and organisations running their own projects. It highlights the impact of working with artists at different levels of intensity and duration across the programme and has a specific focus on the Phase 3 commissions of Close Knit and The Bellwether Project ¹.

Context

Arts Council England's (ACE) vision for the future of creativity and culture, Let's Create, has an ambition that by 2030 England will be a country in which the creativity of everyone is "valued and given the chance to flourish". England will be a country where "every one of us has access to a remarkable range of high-quality cultural experiences". ²

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.

Museums Northumberland bait, and the Creative People and Places (CPP) programme more widely, provides an ecosystem where this ambition becomes closer to reality. Importantly, CPP recognises that people will begin their creative journeys at quite different points based on past experience, access to opportunities, socio economic factors and the self-confidence or desire to try something new.

For many people their initial participation in creative activities may require only entry-level skills or encouragement to 'give something a try'. This experience can provide participants with a strong sense of achievement and form the catalyst for people to try out a range of different activities and art forms. Recognition of the role of taster activities, for example in promoting creativity at a community level is essential. The funding and availability of such activities in sustainable and consistent ways is therefore a necessary ingredient of increasing public participation. Taster opportunities are often crucial to building the confidence and relationships needed to move into longer term commissioning with local communities.

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](#).

² Let's Create | Arts Council England

In framing a definition of a creative journey in the context of Museums Northumberland bait it is important to acknowledge the ethos of CPP in diversifying and broadening participation before deepening participation by increasing current participants' levels and type of involvement.³

Creative journeys in the context of Museums Northumberland bait can occur at any point along this continuum. Moreover, the scale or speed of movement along this continuum is wholly personal, with small steps for one often representing a more significant journey and greater progress than for others.

Creative Journeys

The nature, scale and opportunities to support creative journeys across the three phases of the Museums Northumberland bait programme have been framed by changes in project duration, approach and content. All phases of the programme have incorporated opportunities for new and existing participants to engage in creative activities. For example, short taster sessions have been delivered with aims to inspire and engage participants, or increasingly in Phases 2 and 3, inform artist briefs or help shape multi-stage commissions.

Informed by the development of a Quality Framework,⁴ the programme has also made an ongoing and consistent appraisal of 'what good looks like' to help shape creative journeys. Crucially, the programme has assessed the quality of both the process of engaging with communities, and the artistic product or final output of any project or commission.

Underpinning factors

The key factor underpinning initial and sustained creative journeys highlighted by participants is the opportunity to explore new and different creative activities. The role of the Museums Northumberland bait programme as trusted intermediary between local people, groups, artists, partners, funding and creative expertise to provide this opportunity is therefore vital.

The attractiveness, quality and sustainability of this process is increased by ensuring that the environment is safe and convenient, the activities are distinctive and culturally relevant and the creative practitioners involved are skilled in participatory work. When combined appropriately, these factors enable people and groups to grow in confidence and overcome any barriers to engagement they may hold and begin or extend their creative journeys.

³ Rand (2006) - 'A New Framework for Building Participation in the Arts'.

⁴ In 2014 Museums Northumberland bait 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 \(baittime.to\)](https://www.baittime.to)

***“I’ve done things that I never expected to do including
some slightly wacky stuff!”
(participant)***

***“Trying something new has taken me out of my comfort zone”
(participant)***

***“I feel listened to and involved”
(participant)***

Participants are more likely to start, enjoy and continue their creative journeys when they can relate to a topic and utilise an art form to express themselves, promote a pertinent subject area or work towards a larger project’s goals. The chance of finding an artform, artist or creative channel to help transfer enthusiasm into engagement is heightened with the availability of ‘taster’ activities. These have been used as both one-off activities and the start of deeper interactions to shape longer-term commissions and individual creative journeys.

***“We just picked and chose what we wanted to do - a mix and match”
(participant)***

“I’ve loved it. I’ve loved the variety” (participant)

***“I got more involved as its gone on as I know the
importance of having a go”
(participant)***

Importantly, both the project work with groups across South East Northumberland and multi-stage commissions support in Phases 2 and 3 of the programme have provided the framework to build on any momentum created though initial taster activities. Participants also explained how the quality of, and confidence in, their creative output increased through repeat engagement with the programme, positive feedback, practice at home or on wider projects with other organisations. This contributes to a desire for a different challenge and a new step in their creative journeys.

***“I gained enough confidence from audiences liking our performances
to try new things, managing artistic projects and attempting
new creative writing styles”
(participant)***

***“It’s given me so much confidence to have a go and get to the end product which I never thought would be possible. It’s just amazing to be part of an exhibition”
(participant)***

***“You saw your own piece of work and then the zines so you could go back if you needed to and consolidate your learning.”
(participant)***

***“I felt I had a value. I was part of something. It wasn’t just something tokenistic, it was a whole process in the community - the Bellwether community”
(participant)***

Participants also enjoy the security, encouragement and reinforcement that working in an informal group offers. This incorporates learning from other participants, as much as from the artists and Museums Northumberland bait team. Significantly however, whilst knowing some people prior to a project brings a degree of comfort, familiarity and confidence to try something new, participants gained added social, individual and creative pleasure from sharing their creative journeys with new and different people. This again acts as a stimulus to continued engagement and extended creative journeys.

***“I wouldn’t have joined in if it had been a class as I would have measured myself against other people”
(participant)***

***“It’s great to meet other people with shared interests and a common goal”
(participant)***

***“Everyone was just the same, we all felt our work wasn’t great but then we could share our thoughts and feel confident by seeing other people’s work. I didn’t know anyone and now I’ve got new friends and we can take part in things together.”
(participant)***

There is a feeling amongst some older participants that their interactions with Museums Northumberland bait had rekindled their love of creativity from childhood. They also highlighted the need for greater and more targeted stimulation and encouragement for some younger people to embrace the opportunities on offer through the programme given competing interests.

***“We had nothing so we needed to be creative as a child.
You did more with the people around you back then’ ”
(participant)***

Younger people engaged as part of the Close Knit commission gained confidence in working with a range of people of different ages and cultures that they wouldn't otherwise encounter. This environment assisted them in learning new creative and transferable skills which can contribute to their college coursework including speaking in public, scheduling, curation and event promotion. Refugee families involved in the project also stated that they liked the group environment with the support of artists and Creative Producers helping to sustain and increase their enjoyment over time.

***“It became less daunting the longer it went on. I loved the experience of
taking part in something really big’ ”
(participant)***

Similarly, the work of the programme with voluntary sector and volunteer led groups outside of the Phase 2 and 3 commissions has also stimulated creative journeys amongst management and clients/participants alike. Using the ideas and inspiration provided by the Museums Northumberland bait team, groups including Heart of the Hirst and Bacmans Community Ltd have gained skills in fundraising and managing increasingly complex creative projects whilst inspiring the creative journeys of their local communities.

***“We’ve had craft packs, holiday clubs, animation, photography, trips to
Woodhorn Museum - something we would have never thought about in a
million years”
(partner)***

There was agreement that the skills of the artists working on Museums Northumberland bait projects and commissions are paramount to enabling and informing the creative journeys experienced by participants. The balance achieved by artists between supporting, guiding and enabling people to shape creative journeys is seen by participants as important when interacting with people with different levels of past engagement, confidence and creative experience. The process of co-creation facilitated by artists in conjunction with the Museums Northumberland bait team is judged to provide an environment where everyone feels they can engage and advance, both in shaping and delivering work.

***“We were allowed to run with it in our own direction and not constrained
in any way”
(participant)***

***“I was learning a new skill and realising I could do it on my own with a little back up”
(participant)***

Creative People and Places does not have artist development as one of its core objectives. However, discussions with artists commissioned by Museums Northumberland bait reveals advancement in artistic practice as a result of their experiences with the programme. This development has typically linked to competence and confidence in working collaboratively with communities. Moreover, artists expressed desire to build upon this area in future commissions both within CPP and beyond.

***“It’s totally transformed my practice. I think just the way that I perceive my position with everybody else.”
(artist)***

The COVID-19 pandemic was another factor which has helped to shape the creative journeys of participants and established arts and community groups. There is a general feeling that COVID-19 changed the focus of some people’s creative journeys in response to increased social isolation and changing attitudes to risk. In some instances this took the form of increasing the intensity of engagement, and in others it forged a desire to return to ‘pure’ participation rather than the responsibility of sourcing funding and managing projects.

***“COVID threw everything up in the air, we fell back on art as a security blanket”
(participant)***

***“We want opportunity, not responsibility”
(participant)***

Outcomes and impact - what changed as a result?

The Museums Northumberland bait programme has provided the structure, opportunity and inspiration required by local people across South East Northumberland and artists working in the sector to progress in their individual and group creative journeys.

Programme participants, arts groups and partner organisations have all signalled the impact of interactions with the programme on their individual and collective creative journeys. This has seen local people taking up the opportunity to explore a wide variety of art forms and creative activities and take on greater responsibility for shaping commissions from brief development to exhibition curation.

***“bait allowed us to do something different. It increased the involvement of some folks - sent them off on their own way. Animation was something completely new”
(participant)***

Crucially, people’s creative journeys have also extended beyond the programme with projects evolving out of Museums Northumberland bait activity and individuals moving on to employ their skills in external projects. Examples include the broader portfolio of respected work completed by the Bedlington Creatives group, new drama groups involving participants from the From the Ashes ⁵ project and a photography group inspired by As the Days Get Lighter ⁶. Participants also outlined the impact of the programme in increasing their everyday creativity, volunteering and different outlook on culture in the local area.

***“I look at things differently now. I use art in more places - I took it on holiday to do. I also found out about places I didn’t know about that were on my doorstep. It was great and we found so many new places”
(participant)***

***“They’ve opened up our eyes to what we took for granted”
(participant)***

***“I’m open and keen now as a result of the confidence I’ve gained from this”
(participant)***

Groups and organisations from beyond the cultural sector have also been on creative journeys, increasing the frequency and intensity of use of creative approaches to achieve a range of socioeconomic objectives and targets. These include the sourcing of funding for artistic commissions by the Heart of the Hirst ⁷ community group in Ashington, to the use of craft activities with young people and development of photographic exhibits by Bacmans Community Limited ⁸. Each of these developments can be linked to incremental gains in knowledge, confidence and capacity derived from support by Museums Northumberland bait.

Artists working on Museums Northumberland bait commissions have also added to their knowledge, skills sets and CVs with specific reference to working collaboratively with communities and local partners to co-design and co-deliver culturally relevant work. Artists revealed an increased desire to be commissioned on similar projects, recognising the value of CPP work on their record.

5 [From The Ashes – Curious Monkey](#)

6 [As The Days Get Lighter - Museums Northumberland](#)

7 [Heart of the Hirst](#)

8 [Bacmans Community Limited](#)

Artists working on Museums Northumberland bait commissions have also been highlighted as inspirations to participants. The influence of a range of creative practitioners has been referenced in terms of encouraging deeper engagement for both leisure and career ambitions. Crucially, this encouragement has included learning about technical aspects of specific art forms, (e.g. photography technique) and ways of approaching socially engaged practice.

***“I would have given up on my hopes of becoming a documentary photographer without my experience of working with Julian Germain on the Ashington District Star. It honed my inter-personal skills so I could become a community-engaged artist.”
(participant)***

Lessons learnt

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

- Creating the conditions to maximise access to creative activities, (i.e. by reducing financial, social and knowledge-based barriers) provides the opportunity for people from traditionally lesser engaged groups to begin and extend their creative journeys.
 - Participants, artists and partners see the intermediary function provided by Museums Northumberland bait as crucial to engaging local people and assisting them on their creative journeys. They stressed that in the future absence of the programme, if there is a lack of other offers to adequately take its place, people will lose out on the opportunity to enjoy creative activities.
 - Taster activities provide an effective method to encourage engagement and broaden creative journeys by providing a wide selection of activities from which to initiate future participation.
 - Group activities provide a trusted and supportive environment in which to nurture creative journeys for participants with varying levels of experience and self-confidence.
 - Younger people appreciated the opportunity to work on activities which support their studies and to be involved in a large scale project.
 - The momentum of a creative journey, particularly in its infancy, can be sustained and enhanced through repeat participation in multiple projects or multiple phases of longer-term commissions.
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- The COVID-19 pandemic provided both the impetus to re-evaluate creative journeys, with some individuals increasing engagement after a period of relative social isolation. Others decided to ‘simplify’ their creative activity to focus on enjoying participation rather than taking on the responsibility of managing complex funding bids and larger commissions.
- Exposure to the socially engaged practice of established artists can provide both learning and inspiration to people in their initial steps of a creative journey or those with ambitions of forging a career in the cultural sector.

Summary

Museums Northumberland bait has provided the opportunity through a range of short term projects and longer-term commissions to increase levels of participation in creative activities. These opportunities have both initiated and helped to broaden and deepen the scale and scope of creative journeys for local people in South East Northumberland. Key factors underpinning progression in creative journeys include the skills and inspiration provided by established artists and the incremental support from the Museums Northumberland bait team to boost aspiration, capacity and confidence of arts and community groups to expand the scale and complexity of their creative endeavours.



The Bellwether Project exhibition launch at Woodhorn Museum
Image Jason Thompson / The Bigger Picture

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Date of document: October 2022

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