

# Museums Northumberland bait - The Role of Communities in Commissioning and Shaping the Programme

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Colour to the Grey, credit: Jason Thompson

## Introduction

**The role and influence of communities in helping to shape the design, content and delivery of the arts has evolved considerably in the last 15 years. In line with a raft of recent research in this area<sup>1</sup> citing the value of encouraging individual creativity and a shifting of power relationships from arts practitioners and organisations to communities<sup>2</sup>, Creative People and Places (CPP) provides the framework of support to enable and empower people to engage in a process of co-designing and co-producing arts and cultural activities in their community. Where successful, this approach has been found to result in more locally relevant arts activity as community voices are combined with professional expertise to transform funding into work that reflects the needs, ambitions and characteristics of local people and places. The overriding impression is therefore of practice which is delivered ‘with’ communities rather than ‘for’ or ‘to’ communities.**

This case study showcases ways that people from across South East Northumberland have played roles in projects commissioned by Museums Northumberland bait during Phase Two (2016-2019)<sup>3</sup> of the programme. The case study highlights good practice and learning, and examines the strengths and challenges associated with communities providing significant input to decision making and delivery.

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<sup>1</sup> Warwick Commission (2015) - ‘Enriching Britain: Culture, Creativity and Growth’. University of Warwick.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.creativepeopleplaces.org.uk/our-learning/shared-decision-making-toolkit>

<sup>3</sup> Phase One of the programme ran between 2013-16

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## Project information

### Project aims

The Theory of Change covering the programme 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?’*. Accordingly, communities have been involved in innovative collaborative working with the Museums Northumberland bait team, artists and partners to achieve shared goals and inform the development and delivery of the programme since its initial planning stages. Phase Two of the programme has provided opportunities to use the learning from this collaboration to further explore how communities can add value to arts projects whilst achieving both artistic and a range of social and personal development outcomes.

### Target participants

Collaboration between artists, project partners, the Museums Northumberland bait team and crucially, local communities, has been a consistent, if evolving, feature of the programme since the development of the original bid document. More specifically in relation to shaping specific aspects of the artistic project journey, elements of ‘co-design’ and ‘co-production’ have been increasingly recognised, and used, by the programme as key mechanisms to engage participants. This is reflected in the role of communities in helping to shape project activity as active decision makers in the planning, commissioning and delivery of the majority of Phase Two activity.

### Projects and partners

The projects and partners featured in this case study include:

- **Museums Northumberland bait** Creative People and Places programme as commissioner and provider of support to organisations through its team, including Creative Producers, Arts for Wellbeing Manager and Project Director
- **Wonderfolk** was developed through working with local communities and groups to collect ‘experiences, stories, dreams and inspirations’ to create an ‘interactive family quest’ inspired by local culture and heritage. Young people from [Leading Link](#) formed part of the commissioning panel which selected the Wonderfolk proposal and worked with a local primary school to generate ideas from arts activities including writing, storytelling, drawing and dancing as part of a ‘Wonderfolk school takeover’. The Wonderfolk quest attracted over 1,800 visitors to Woodhorn Museum over a six-week period in summer 2017 and generated great reviews from families.
- **Colour to the Grey** - Young people from across South East Northumberland, supported by youth organisations, worked together to commission a year-long artistically ambitious project, which celebrated young people’s creativity, inspired social change and extended creative journeys and experiences. The artist brief was developed out of a series of consultations with 50 young people with the final concept involving youth-based organisations working in partnership to empower young people to commission the project and lead on decision making where appropriate.
- **From the Ashes** is a year-long drama and creative writing commission developed in partnership with residents aged from 8 to 80 years. It follows an extensive period of research and development involving people and a range of community groups participating in arts taster sessions. The feedback from people attending the sessions inspired the co-production of an artist brief to work with an intergenerational group of people from Ashington to

produce a radio drama. Members of the group supported Museums Northumberland bait in shortlisting and selecting artists from interviews complemented by live workshops to enable the groups to inform decision making through a public vote.

- **Brothers-in-Arts** emerged from research commissioned by Museums Northumberland bait to explore why a smaller proportion of men were taking up opportunities created through the programme. A group of men formed a steering group and worked with artists to test the research findings including exploring barriers and catalysts to men engaging in the arts. The group agreed upon a series of arts taster sessions to inform the project and a decision to work with different groups based on the response to and inspiration from the different arts activities.

## **Project activities**

The role of communities in shaping arts and cultural activities are outlined below in terms of key issues, successes and learning in respective of key elements of project development and delivery drawn from the above projects.

### Initial Project Development

Effective collaborative working, driven by effective communication, trust and transparency is crucial if the experience of an artist is to combine effectively with the local and cultural knowledge of future participants and/or local partners. A research and development (R&D) phase within Phase Two projects has provided the environment and impetus for high quality and focused work with local communities. Involving communities in the initial process of testing ideas and developing shared aims and objectives has set a precedent for future working based on an equal partnership between artists and local people.

**Colour to the Grey** involved the delivery of a series of live art workshop sessions as a tool to connect with young people and gain views and insights which eventually led to the final idea for the five day art exhibition. This phase of the project engaged seven youth organisations with each taking part in up to four sessions with an artist. During these sessions the young people were also encouraged to explore and connect with their local 'patch' by designing a walk, taking in places they believe to be significant. This element of the project enabled the artist to connect with the young people's perceptions of place by completing the walks mapped out in each of their communities.

Experiences of project development highlights the value of a flexibility and time in order to foster the trust, skills and confidence of communities in CPP areas and allow a project, within agreed parameters, to develop at the right pace and direction. The value of participatory work and direct engagement in this process, for example through the planning and delivery of taster sessions, has produced extensive learning to support project development. There remains a need however for flexibility in establishing targets, especially whilst helping to model effective partnership working to the benefit of projects in the longer term.

The **Brothers-in-Arts** and **From the Ashes** projects have also utilised a series of arts taster sessions informed by consultation to gauge demand and inform project development. Both participants and artists highlighted the strength and sense of ownership created in the groups as a result of the tasters. Feedback from sessions was used to inform the decisions made to inspire other groups to engage in the arts in the case of Brothers-in-Arts, and shape the intergenerational nature and artforms underpinning the From the Ashes artist commission.

### Artist Selection

Experience highlights that an examination of past work and/or obtaining 'good' references provides no guarantee of artists' ability to engage and work with people effectively in practice.

Lessons from involving communities in the process of selecting artists include the value of local people, with sufficient guidance and support, recognising the skills and attributes required by an artist to work effectively with them on their project. These include informing project development with an understanding of local issues and cultures and the participatory skills and experience of socially-engaged practice to manage the demands of project development in CPP areas.

The initial focus of **Colour to the Grey** was to consult a range of young people to obtain their ideas and aspirations for a creative project that could concentrate on issues that affect and are pertinent to people living across South East Northumberland. A range of young people's groups were consulted, and these discussions helped shape the development of an artist's brief. Young people were actively involved in the process of shortlisting artists from the applications received, guided by a quality framework and shortlisting criteria and supported by staff from Northumberland College and Education Other Than At School (EOTAS)<sup>4</sup>. Two young people formed part of the interview panel, empowered to make the final decision on which artist to appoint.

The commissioning process for **From the Ashes** was facilitated by Museums Northumberland but inspired and shaped by local people through the establishment of a panel to shortlist and interview artists. Using a simplified version of the programme's quality framework, the community panel were supported in shortlisting and rating the responses to a brief developed in conjunction with the group prior to a formal interview and open creative workshop with perspective participants.

### Guiding Project Delivery

Many of the successes of projects shaped by the views of local people, are built upon an ethos of collaboration which is intrinsically linked to the capacity and willingness of partners, artists and participants to embrace partnership working. However, whilst co-design and co-production should incorporate the input of communities, the skills of artists remain crucial in providing guidance and the required expertise to meet the evolving aims and emerging challenges of CPP projects.

***“Artists’ practice is generally about making work - socially engaged practice enables them to work with people to inform it, influence it or shape it, but the artists need to play a key role in creating it. They are the conductor to the orchestra.”***

(Artist)

The input of communities in guiding project delivery as part of a steering or reference group has been utilised by a number of Phase Two projects. Crucially, this ethos of co-design has been maintained in project development and delivery with community members of the **From the Ashes** project driving the direction of the artistic production with the support of the artists from Curious Monkey.

The **Colour to the Grey** project formed a group of young leaders from the organisations that had been engaged during the R&D phase, with an objective to work with a smaller group of young leaders to explore what being an ‘activist’ means and to understand what change they’d like to make in their community. To support young people in their exploration of emerging themes, a series of ‘discovery’ sessions were established in which a variety of professionals and specialists from different viewpoints were invited to share their knowledge. The Discovery sessions provided a forum for young leaders to ask questions and develop their understanding and awareness of a range of organisations and services, building their confidence and communication skills whilst also

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<sup>4</sup> EOTAS is the name given to education provision which is not at school. Alternative education is arranged by the local authority for pupils who are unable to attend school as a result of permanent exclusion or for health and medical reasons.

shaping their ideas for the arts exhibition.

In contrast, although consultation with audience members was very positive overall, the participatory ambitions of the **Wonderfolk** project were not fully realised, both in terms of involving local community and arts groups and sustaining the involvement of young people involved in the artist selection process. Whilst the process of engaging communities revealed weaknesses in contracting and communications between and within the commissioned artists and with Museums Northumberland bait, the impact on participants was highlighted in consultation with the young people. The experience was described as mixed, with the benefits gained from involvement in the process of selecting artists for a major commission, set against a lack of subsequent involvement in project development and delivery as initially envisaged.

### Participation, Sharing and Review

Time and flexibility are vital features of successful collaborative working within CPP programmes. Whilst adhering to overall deadlines, the pace of co-design and co-production should reflect the needs of the partners and project timescales, but also be guided by the time required by participants to be ready and able to help shape and deliver activities.

The final phase of **Colour to the Grey** involved an intensive period of activity to develop the ideas and creative content for a five-day arts exhibition entitled 'Art, Activism & Wellbeing'. The young people were supported by the artist team through a series of leadership group activities in which the creative content of the exhibition was developed and decisions were taken on the locations and scheduling of the arts activities. Input and support from the artist team enabled the young people to learn from the practical experience of professional artists and also take responsibility for other aspects of delivering a public art event, including risk assessment, event licensing, marketing and promotion.

Collaboration with the programme through **Wonderfolk** is recognised by Leading Link as providing the young people with a much greater appreciation of the artistic process, (i.e. from concept, recruitment, co-delivery through to review) and a valued wider set of skills than would have been the case if just participating in projects, with a number of young people going on to work independently on other arts projects as a consequence.

### **Key challenges**

Both Museums Northumberland bait and the groups partnering in Phase Two activity have identified a number of challenges associated with communities playing a significant role in project planning and delivery:

- Trying to meet expectations on achieving effective collaboration can create project management challenges where partners fail to engage with communities effectively or where logistical and capacity issues place pressure on delivery.
- All projects benefiting from community input will be different. Consequently, there cannot be one precise plan for collaborative working given the needs of different projects and the respective varying characteristics, objectives, knowledge and skills of different groups.
- Whilst flexibility and time are key catalysts to successful project development, they can create difficulties in retaining the participation of different groups, including young people given the lure of other activities. This provides a challenge in maintaining momentum and engagement over a longer timeframe, (e.g. by maintaining communications or encouraging arts participation between sessions).
- Clarification of the language and terminology underpinning collaborative working with communities is crucial given the number of different terms and interpretations of these

terms. This terminology, and the subject matter of discussions may have to be layered, delivered separately or reinforced by a trusted intermediary, (e.g. youth worker) in order to engage effectively with different age groups.

- Artists engaging with Museums Northumberland bait for the first time or developing their skills in participatory practice may take longer to adapt to expected ways of working. However, it is important to work with new artists as relying on a small pool of experienced or familiar artists may limit artist options for a project.

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## Outcomes and impact – what changed as a result?

The role afforded to communities to shape arts provision has resulted in a wide variety of outcomes and impacts.

Project activities successfully utilising co-design and co-production techniques were found to usually generate higher quality outcomes with greater prospects for sustainability.

**Colour to the Grey** has succeeded in engaging and inspiring young people from across South East Northumberland to take the lead in using arts as a tool for social action and change in their communities. The project provided opportunities for over 80 young people to engage with and contribute to the creation of an exhibition around a topic that has resonance with their day to day lives. It also helped to raise awareness within the wider community about mental health and wellbeing and to also facilitate connections between different groups of young people across the area.

***“This project more than any other has crossed into real life and has felt like it had the power to make a real difference.”***

(Artist)

The experience of working collaboratively has been a learning curve for some members of the Brothers-in-Arts group who may be experiencing relative isolation as a result health issues, work or retirement. The group has provided opportunities for people to make friends whilst enjoying new experiences and developing technical and interpersonal skills including compromising and listening.

***“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.”***

(Project participant)

***“It has given me a chance to connect with people in a way that I have never had before.”***

(Project participant)

The **Colour to the Grey** project has also enabled young people to channel their ideas and energy as part of a social action initiative and has generated momentum and interest for their continuing engagement in community activism. For many of the young people involved in **From the Ashes** this was the first time they had engaged with an arts project outside of school. With exposure to working alongside professional artists they were seen to realise, with encouragement from the older members of the group, that the arts can provide an alternative to the established job and career opportunities for someone living in Ashington.

***“It’s given the youngsters a better sense of employment opportunities beyond retail. This is an opportunity for them to see out of the box, which they shouldn’t waste.”***

(Project participant)

Consultation also highlighted that some individuals may feel more comfortable playing more of a passive role or need time and support to develop confidence before being able to influence planning and delivery. This was especially the case for younger members of the **From the Ashes** project who, given levels of maturity and attention, required the structure they were familiar with from school and other youth activities, in order to maintain focus and in a limited number of instances involvement in the project.

The research and development phase of Phase Two projects provides both the environment and impetus for high quality and focused collaborative working to explore new artforms or build on a favourable experience within a taster session later in the project. In the case of a From the Ashes this has created a groundswell of demand for further experiences of a similar quality alongside a realisation from members of the group that this may also have to be led by the group and supported through external fundraising given the stage of the programme.

***“It’s a shame it’s a one-off. Once the professionals go away, how do we carry on?”***

(Project participant)

**Colour to the Grey** has helped to build confidence and agency in a group of young people that are motivated to support and lead others as part of social change initiatives. This has the potential to inspire and engage a wider cohort of young people to take part in creative activities that help them to have a stronger voice in their community.

***“For the leaders, for some of them this was the first time in their lives they were whole heartedly asked and trusted by ‘adult professionals’ to lead. This was incredibly empowering for them and I’d expect huge ripples from this in the coming months and years.”***

(Artist)

## **Lessons learnt**

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

- Collaboration with communities is most effective in developing ownership of culturally relevant arts activities when local people are engaged at the initial project planning stage.
- The focus and flexibility offered by collaborative working with communities during the R&D phase of project development encourages quality artistic decisions that can inform more effective delivery and sustained participation. Participants should be provided with an informed idea of what the artist(s) involved can offer them in order to inspire and place plans in the context of what is achievable.
- Any variance in understanding and interpretation amongst artists of how to work effectively in collaboration with communities needs to be explored as part of artist selection. The artist guidance on preferred approaches to collaboration issued by Museums Northumberland bait in July 2017 provides a template for all partners to better understand agreed key principles of



From the Ashes radio drama rehearsals, credit: Jason Thompson



Prof Parkyr and Leading Link team, credit: Richard Kenworthy

collaboration including working with communities.

- Partners and funders need to be flexible in planning project outputs whilst participants develop their own role and ability to inform organic project development and delivery. The pace of co-design and co-production should reflect the skills, experience and confidence of communities.
- Developing trust and respect in relationships with communities that can see the impact and significance of their involvement in a project helps to achieve shared aims and increase the quality of collaborative working in the longer term.
- Ensuring a shared understanding of project goals, desired approaches and the roles and levels of commitment of all partners helps to remove boundaries between professionals and communities.
- The skills of the artists involved in CPP projects remain paramount, especially when dealing with challenges in delivery or translating the ideas and concepts of communities into practical and achievable art works. Museums Northumberland bait's role as a broker in partnership development has helped to identify and engage quality artists able to work effectively with communities.
- There is merit in making project participants aware of the commitment to, and benefits of developing a 'sustainability' plan to projects earlier in the process. This is especially important where communities have invested significantly in the creative process and/or have seen their inspiration to maintain their engagement increase.
- Given that the starting point for each participant's creative journey differs, support mechanisms need to be in place to enable participants to develop both artistically and personally through the process.
- Working with a wide network of project partners over a long timeframe creates opportunities and challenges with implications for communications, costs and contracting. It is important to be clear from the outset on the level of commitment and role required from artists, partners and communities to enable projects to realise their ambitions and potential. This could take the form of Terms of Reference for a group or designated roles for community members.

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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 has worked to increase levels of participation in quality arts activity by supporting communities to participate effectively and meaningfully alongside artists, partners and the Museums Northumberland bait team. The learning from Phase One of the programme has enabled Phase Two projects to use co-design and co-production approaches to generate higher quality outcomes in line with the interests, skills and aspirations of communities with greater prospects for sustained engagement in the arts. Projects including **From the Ashes** and **Colour to the Grey** have enabled people of all ages to help plan, develop, manage and produce quality arts projects with the support of artists and the Museums Northumberland bait team.

***“I hadn’t seen anything like it before – it was wonderful, I loved it. Everyone was buzzing with excitement at the potential of what the community could do.”***

(Project participant)

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

The approach to collaborative working characterising Phase Two projects has enabled communities from across South East Northumberland to be involved in the programme on a variety of levels. In playing a significant role in shaping projects, the programme’s use of elements of co-design and co-production have been successfully employed to engage a wide range of participants. In addition to communities engaging with the arts as audience members, there are many examples in Phase Two projects of local people playing an increasingly strategic role in decision making, (e.g. selecting artists and shaping content) and leadership of arts activities with the support of artists skilled in socially engaged practice.

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

Projects working with communities have reported a range of legacy outcomes emanating from communities co-producing, co-designing and participating in arts activities. Participants highlighted a range of positive social outcomes which they attribute to their involvement in the programme including reduced social exclusion and loneliness, stress reduction and help in recovering from addictions and mental health problems, (e.g. from sustained involvement in project steering groups and pride in being involved in a high profile community project), all of which will contribute to improving the well-being of local people.

### **Ambition: to leave a sustainable legacy of enhanced capacity, resources and infrastructure for the arts in South East Northumberland**

The programme has made strong progress towards building a legacy of skills, capacity, resources and infrastructure for the arts in South East Northumberland based around enabling communities to shape the content and delivery of arts and cultural activities. The legacy of the programme is underpinned by the processes developed to support project activity including the development of quality guidelines and a flexible and innovative approach to programme design and management informed by continuous assessment of good practice and learning. Museums Northumberland bait has also supported the development of a range of skills, knowledge and confidence amongst local communities which will help to meet the demand for further arts activities amongst South East Northumberland communities generated through the programme.

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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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