

This case study is the first in a series of five which will explore key strands of the Arts and Social Change programme within Citizen Power Peterborough. This set of case studies will explore how these projects contribute to the aims of Citizen Power and uncover some of the inherent challenges we have encountered, in the hope that these may prove useful for similar initiatives.

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PEOPLE. CREATE. CHANGE.

CITIZEN POWER PETERBOROUGH

Citizen Power Peterborough is a two-year programme of action supported by Peterborough City Council, the Royal Society of Arts and Arts Council England. The aim is to build connections between people and communities, get people more involved in public life and encourage active citizenship. Citizen Power Peterborough re-examines many aspects of life in the city through a number of related projects focused on new ways of supporting local people and their communities to make a positive difference. There are six projects in Citizen Power; Recovery Capital, Peterborough Curriculum, Civic Commons, ChangeMakers, Sustainable Citizenship and Arts and Social Change.

ARTS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Arts and Social Change looks at the role of arts and imagination in creating new connections between people and where they live in order to strengthen participation in community life in Peterborough. This programme involves a wide range of projects that place artists at the centre of re-imagining the possibilities of what a place could be and how to create this together with a focus upon:

- The commissioning of high quality, innovative arts interventions
- The building and strengthening of a locally based arts ecology
- The exploration of the role artists can play and contribute within social change contexts
- The integration of arts and creativity within the city's aspirations and initiatives

CASE STUDY 1 EXPERIMENTS IN PLACE MAKING

INTRODUCING AN EXPERIMENT

The Arts & Social Change strand of Citizen Power has an overarching aim: to support the development of a flourishing arts scene in Peterborough underpinned by a stronger sense of belonging amongst its citizens. The primary strategy for achieving this is to build 'connectivity' amongst artists, between artists and the community and – most importantly in terms of active citizenship – amongst local people themselves.

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Artists working in Peterborough had been discussing how this might be achieved at the Creative Gatherings (organised for Arts & Social Change by Chris Higgins and Fiona Lesley of the MAP Consortium). It quickly became clear that practical examples would be needed to underpin and inform the debates and conversations that had begun with Peterborough City Council's neighbourhood managers about effective ways of working together in the city and for the benefit of its people. The Experiments in Place Making programme, launched in October 2010, was the outcome: a fresh approach to developing community identity and civic purpose through quietly innovative creative engagements.

The Experiments in Place Making programme has worked by partnering two locally based artists who have not worked together before with a neighbourhood manager in order to develop new approaches to place-making and conduct specific interventions that address a local need. Seven projects in seven neighbourhoods were planned and, a year on, four have been completed.

THE NATURE OF AN EXPERIMENT

One thing that makes Experiments in Place Making different from more traditional arts interventions is its genuinely experimental nature. Each project is a different attempt to remodel the relationship between the artist and the citizen and to integrate creative with social practice. The artist has to create a project design that is sensitive to local needs and that offers more than a targeted workshop approach. Ideally, their intervention should act as a catalyst for social and even political engagement. Although each experiment is small scale, it should serve to show how a more lasting change might happen. It could then, in practical terms, provide something solid for council officers and artists to build on.

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Out of this programme can come not just greater social engagement amongst people living in the same place but the possibility of a more creative and productive relationship between citizens and their local government. These experiments provide a hint of new ways in which ideas can be exchanged and issues negotiated as part of a new and more democratic conversation. Both the project itself and the new relationships it has generated will help to create a useful legacy: a new ecology for joined up practice and creative approaches to shared problem-solving. In discovering the opportunities and benefits of working in the 'civic sphere', artists will understand better how their talents and skills can help to build genuine forms of community. Neighbourhood managers will understand better how local artists can contribute to greater community cohesion and what they need to do to broker relationships between local people and their creative counterparts.



↳ The LOVE postcard rests on the window ledge of one of the participating houses

A SPECIAL DELIVERY

On the morning of 15th December 2010, the residents of Crawthorne Street and Monument Street in Peterborough awoke to find a handwritten Christmas card on the doormat. Opening it, they found seasonal greetings from two local artists, a question and a set of five colour-coded cards. The question was: What gift would you most like to give this Christmas? Each of the cards bore a single word in capitals: PEACE, HOPE, GOODWILL, LOVE and COMMUNITY. On the reverse were some instructions: Place this card in your downstairs front window, with the COLOURED side facing out, and leave it there for one week.

By Christmas Eve, 31 out of the 81 houses in these two streets had displayed one or more of the cards. Passers-by might not immediately spot what the cards said, as the chosen word was printed unobtrusively, in a lighter tone of the background colour, but the neighbours here would know.

A second mysterious delivery followed, on St Valentine's Day. Each house that had responded to the Christmas campaign received a box of chocolates. The package was wrapped in paper printed with photographs of all 31 front windows displaying cards. There was a note of thanks for participating – and that was that, for the time being.

For artist Stuart Payn, Experiments in Place Making offered a rare chance to 'do something crazy for someone else's benefit':

“ Tom Fox and I developed the idea of the cards as a way of solving a problem: how to engage people in a creative project in the least intrusive way. People really don't want you turning up on their doorstep or accosting them in the street with something like this. Our solution was to remain invisible, so we dropped off our invitations very early one morning, like ninjas. We didn't put our contact details down or say anything more than we weren't trying to sell anything but just hoped to create a piece of art. We wanted people to have their own responses and interactions. ”

Artists like Stuart and Tom are paired up to run each Experiments in Place Making project but are chosen, in Chris Higgins' words, 'almost randomly' in order to encourage each individual to look beyond their usual networks and their own creative discipline and to try something new. The notion of collaboration is one of the core elements in Experiments in Place Making. The other distinctive feature is the notion of 'place making': helping citizens through creative engagement to develop a more active sense of themselves, of their connections with each other and of the place they have chosen or find themselves living in.

← The invitation



THE NOTION OF HOME

Place-making is at the heart of a lot of contemporary arts practice around the country, from the Folkestone Triennial's public art, rooted in that town's specific histories and cultures, to immersive theatre events like the recent community-based performance of *The Passion* by the National Theatre of Wales. The projects in Peterborough are on a more modest scale and budget, but they share the same desire to root the universality of art in the local scene.

The local scene is something neighbourhood managers know all about. For example, the manager was aware that the two streets targeted by the postcards project had once been thriving and sociable but were now places where people barely knew their neighbours. It was therefore a suitable place for a creative intervention and the artists were duly assigned to it. In one or two cases, artists had been in the city long enough to pinpoint such places themselves – one textiles artist suggested an older people's home around the corner from her childhood home and gained council approval for a reminiscence project to be run there in collaboration with a musician.

The meaning of home – and whether people feel Peterborough is home – was central to another intervention, the 'fireplace project', which took place in Fellowes Gardens around the same time as cards were being delivered in Crawthorne Street. On the day of their visit to the estate, artists Sue Shields and Juliet Hawksworth invited residents who had responded to their invitation to bring an object from home that meant something to them, place this on the hearth and be photographed with it. These collaborative portraits led to conversations about home and Peterborough and a particularly useful dialogue with a key resident and community 'gatekeeper' who, although initially cynical, engaged for the whole day and ended up being supportive. As with all the Experiments, there was a sense that this was more the beginning of a significant change than an end to a short-lived project.



'REMINISCENCES AND CONNECTIONS'

Both Anita Bruce and Fiona Lidgley have connections with the local area around the Eaglesthorpe Sheltered Housing Scheme in Peterborough and conducted a workshop with the elderly residents to solicit memories of the area in order to reveal some of the connections they might share. The artists took some large and historic photographs of the area in order to talk about places that had been forgotten. Some unusual connections were discovered – two of the elders discovered a shared connection to a school in Battersea, another owned up

to taking a tram out to Walton (then a village) with her friend and walking across the fields to have a crafty smoke!

There are plans to develop the project using these old photographs as inspiration and bringing residents to these locations as they are now. They also plan to transfer these images to fabric so that the residents and artists can create a quilt of memories and connections.

↑ Above: Old images to connect residents to memories of the past

A HOMEOPATHIC DOSE

Each project so far has taken a different approach to doing something new, outside the conventional 'give 'em a workshop' model. What they all share is a light touch, certainly in terms of resources, but also in the scale of the intervention. Each is a 'homeopathic' dose of creativity. The key to understanding the initiative is that it is not primarily about either hard-and-fast solutions or measurable outcomes: the point is simply to try a new idea out and see what happens.

In the case of the cards experiment, the immediate goal was simply to find out how many people would participate in a creative project where artists were absent – the answer to that was: a surprisingly high number. The artists' second, longer-term purpose was to discover how this success rate could be 'converted into more proactive engagement within a community'. They themselves are convinced that their approach could be 'upscaled' and, encouragingly, so is Graeme Clark, who manages Citizen Power for Peterborough City Council.

“ I have always been clear that this programme is about creating the conditions for change, not the change itself. I think that collating and disseminating evidence from these experiments will show how creative practice can help us to 'deliver differently'. The council is actively looking for new ways to tackle old problems and to encourage people to govern their own lives more effectively. To deliver this, it wants to change how those who work for the council set about things – how we behave. ”

Graeme began, he claims, with zero knowledge of what creative practice might achieve in the community. A year or so and 'a steep learning curve' later, he is convinced. Asked which experiment so far he would pick to support his arguments for artists' potential contribution to the quality of life here, he plumps for the one that took place at Orton Shopping Centre.



In consultation with the local community support officer and the centre manager, artists Alex Airey and Nicola Day-Dempsey worked with eight teenage girls who had been banned from their local mall for antisocial behaviour. The girls were given the responsibility of engaging with the public after receiving training in interview techniques and the ban was lifted temporarily. The subsequent experiment was conceived as an ‘artistic interruption’ into the daily routine of the centre, incorporating installation and performance art. A mockup of a classroom scene was run by the girls in a busy traffic corridor in the centre. This team asked passers-by about their memories of their communities and how they might contribute to the future growth of shared community spaces and reported their findings on a popular local community radio programme. As a result, they have now been invited to become official ‘ambassadors’ of the place they once ran wild in.

↑ Above: Scene of the classroom set up in the Orton Shopping Centre.

THE LEGACY

Graeme is aware that a project with eight people, however successful, might be considered small beer. However, he believes that it isn't always about the numbers but rather ‘the opportunities that even small things open up’. Even if only two or three of the girls found a new belief in their own capabilities, he believes that this project would still have returned extraordinarily high ‘value for money’. The experiment has shown how, with very little expenditure, a local authority might work with engaged artists to turn a problem – in this case, eight unruly youngsters – into an asset.

For Stuart Payn, the experiment he and Tom devised has similar potential. They had plans to run the project over a longer period – to take it up a level by bringing neighbours face-to-face – and then to work towards a community drama event or a street party, where the residents would come out en masse to meet and talk to each other. As Stuart puts it, they had begun by asking, Can we get you to play? They want to say next: That was fun, wasn't it? Now what about...?

For the artists involved, the experience has been challenging, particularly in agreeing a joint creative approach and medium to use with the target community. It has also been very productive, not just in terms of making work, but also in reflecting on their own practice and looking beyond themselves to the potential for further artistic collaborations and deeper engagement with fellow citizens.

For the local people involved, the experiments have shown that a sense of community is still possible, even in the most deprived situations. Giving them the opportunity to participate and take risks in these creative ways has not only allowed residents to show what they can offer to their neighbours but has given them a glimpse of what they could achieve as citizens in their own city.

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Experiments in Place Making and the Citizen Power programme as a whole have already made a significant impact within the local authority and it seems that their inspiring legacy may well have a long-term influence. Head of Neighbourhoods, Adrian Chapman says that, as the programme draws to a close over the next six months, the council will be applying what it has learned to redesigning its delivery of public services:

Rather than us doing things in the traditional, 'we know best' way, we will be looking at more of a 'co-commissioning' approach. As a direct result of Citizen Power, we now know much better how residents feel about living here and how we can involve them much more closely in our decision-making.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

Citizen Power: www.citizenpower.co.uk

Creative Peterborough: www.creativepeterborough.com

Vivacity: www.vivacity-peterborough.com

Stuart Payn, Alex Airey, many artists in Peterborough:
www.BlokCollective.co.uk

The Map: www.mapconsortium.com

The RSA: www.thersa.org