



**AN**

**INVITATION  
TO CREATIVE  
GATHERINGS  
A PRACTICAL RESOURCE**

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Action and Research Centre



People  
Shaped  
Localism

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## **The RSA**

(Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce) believes that everyone should have the freedom and power to turn their ideas into reality – we call this the Power to Create. Through our ideas, research and 27,000-strong Fellowship, we seek to realise a society where creative power is distributed, where concentrations of power are confronted, and where creative values are nurtured.

# An invitation to Creative Gatherings: A Practical Resource

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# Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Wiltshire Council, which has made possible the different elements of the People Shaped Localism project.

We would like to thank everyone in Wiltshire that participated in Creative Gatherings over the past three years, as well as everyone that tested our approach and ideas in the RSA's 'Collaborative Platforms' event that took place in September, 2015. Natalie Remington offered invaluable support in helping to make Creative Gatherings grow in Wiltshire and maintaining the Facebook site.

We would also like to thank the following for offering their valuable experiences and insights that have helped to underpin this resource: Candy Verney, Tim Mason, Penney Ellis, Louise Rennie, Annie Menter, Steve Milton, Hasanul Hoque, Noel Hatch, Joan Munro, Steve Trevillion and Fabian

Davis. Further Creative Gatherings were made possible through Wiltshire's Forum for Community Area Partnerships and Wiltshire's Addiction Support Project and the Recovery Arts Festival team.

The methodology of Creative Gatherings as described in this resource has evolved over 15 years within a variety of initiatives led by Jocelyn Cunningham and is directly influenced by all those who have taken part in them. It would be impossible to attribute any single idea to anyone as a result, however they have gained immeasurably through the expert facilitation and guidance of Chris Higgins of The Map Consortium [www.mapconsortium.com](http://www.mapconsortium.com).

Artists were commissioned to create a response to the Creative Gatherings. For links to this work, please go to: <http://www.otherwaysofworking.co.uk/#!creative-gatherings/c20fz>

# How to use this resource

This is a practical resource that outlines what a Creative Gathering is and offers guidance on how to put one together. Creativity and collaboration are catch-all, overused terms and can describe a myriad of approaches essential to culture change in services and in places. Creative Gatherings bring creativity and collaboration together as a distinct methodology and this resource illustrates how they do so through two place based initiatives, Citizen Power Peterborough and People Shaped Localism.

The resource is especially relevant to anyone with a professional or voluntary interest in civic action who would like to establish potentially low-cost collaborative and engagement approaches that are bottom-up, creative and can appeal to a wide range of people. Those with an interest in place-based platforms and alternatives to traditional consultations

and partnership approaches will also find it useful.

The first part of the resource details what Creative Gatherings are and why they're important as a new way of working and relevant now. The second section provides practical guidance on putting together Creative Gatherings, including key operating principles to bear in mind and necessary practical steps for implementing them. Practical suggestions with examples from the Creative Gatherings in Wiltshire are provided throughout. Detailed descriptions of these Gatherings are included in the appendix and provide a useful template to look at when designing your own.

# Gathering our learning

This resource has been informed by the learning and experiences of people that have participated in creative practice, including Creative Gatherings. The research to support this explored:

- » The key features of creative practice methods (including Creative Gatherings) and their potential as a platform for collaboration.
- » How they influenced participants' perspectives, actions and behaviour.
- » What the benefits of Creative Gatherings are and in what areas they might add most value, particularly in public services and community-based social action.
- » How Creative Gatherings can be applied in practice and what the key practical challenges are.

The main components of our research were:

- » A focus group with people inside Wiltshire that participated in the three Creative Gatherings that were hosted in the county as part of the RSA's People Shaped Localism programme.
- » A one-day workshop bringing together creative practitioners and a breadth of stakeholders in the public, private and community sectors (including some with very little previous experience of creative practice) to 'test' creative practice methods and explore the benefits and challenges of applying them in a range of practice settings.
- » Follow-up semi-structured interviews with a selection of the workshop participants to explore, in depth, the

potential benefits or limitations of creative practice approaches such as Creative Gatherings, and the key challenges and opportunities for applying them.

- » Case study material from Creative Gatherings that were hosted in the past, including in Peterborough as part of the RSA's Citizen Power programme.



*“ Creative Gatherings helped break down perceived hierarchies. When you've broken up boxes and paper strings, you've engaged on an equal basis, and you're more likely to contribute.. ”*

**-Regular participant at Creative Gatherings**



PARTICIPANTS CONSIDERING CHOICES OF MATERIALS, CREATIVE GATHERING, BRADFORD ON AVON



ARTIST RESPONSE TO QUOTE GATHERED FROM RESEARCH IN WILTSHIRE: "HOW CAN WE ENCOURAGE PEOPLE TO WORK TOGETHER SIDE BY SIDE?" ARTIST: CLAIRE SELMAN

# 1. Introduction

Creative Gatherings are meeting spaces with a difference, bringing together a diverse range of people, from a variety of backgrounds, interests and sectors, in order to investigate themes of interest. They incorporate a methodology that is based upon creative practices in the arts. The gatherings are neutral forums, facilitated by people with experience of creative practice and offer safe spaces for provocation and challenge that in turn lead to fresh thinking and new perspectives.

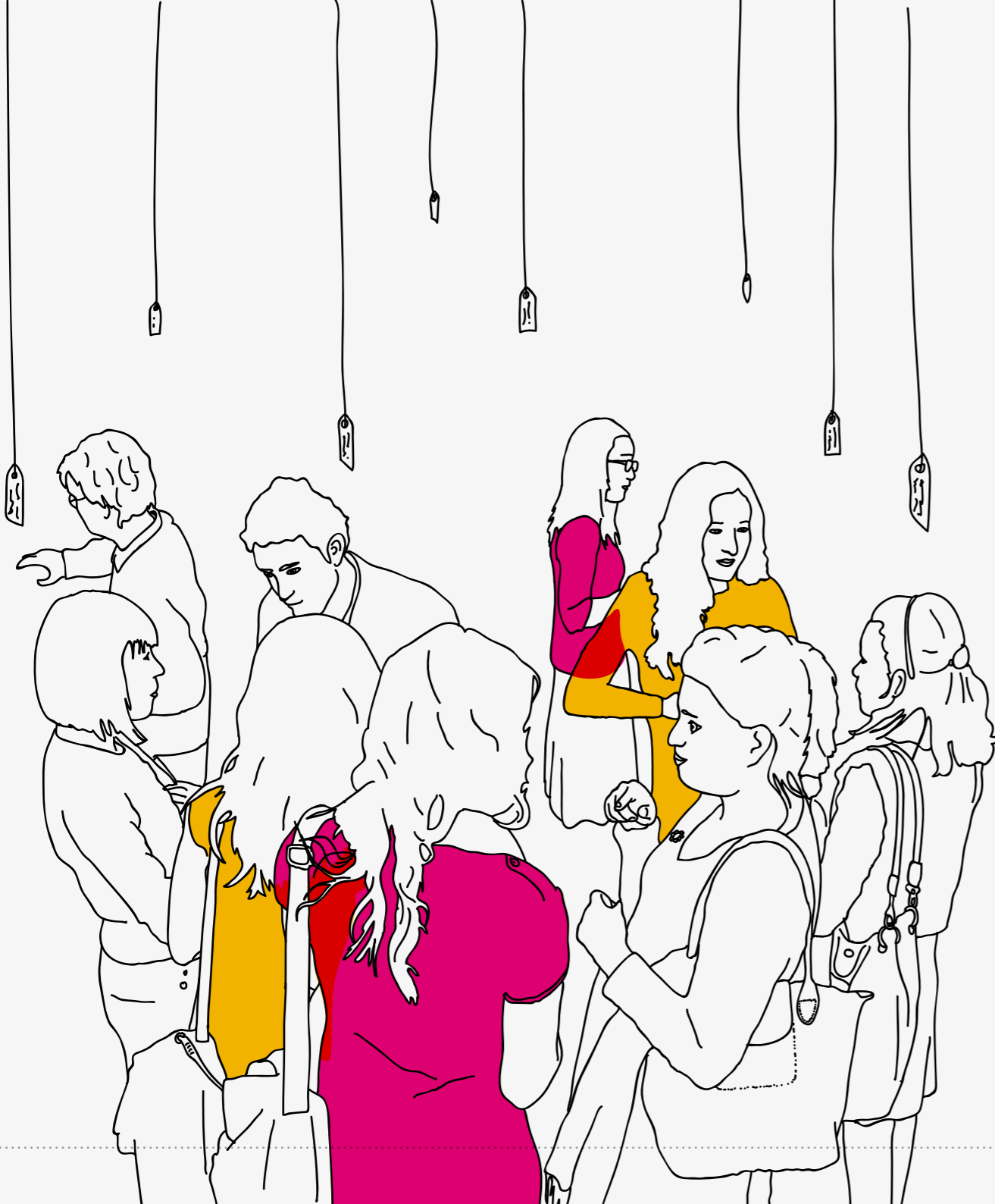
For public servants and for communities facing big challenges, shrinking budgets and new opportunities, Creative Gatherings are one – though only one – answer to the question “How do we do things differently together?”

Creative Gatherings have been used as a tool for the development of partnerships and new ways of working within:

- *Education.*
- *Community development.*
- *Cultural development.*
- *Civic leadership.*
- *Public services.*

The list is not exhaustive. Creative Gatherings have much to offer in other contexts. This resource sets out their key elements in a way that we hope is clear and stimulating. We invite community leaders, public servants, business leaders and others to consider what a Creative Gathering might help them achieve.

As a specific methodology, it has evolved across sectors and initiatives over the last decade. Creative Gatherings originally emerged from Creative Partnerships, the national creative education programme that ran from 2002 to 2011. The RSA developed the methodology further



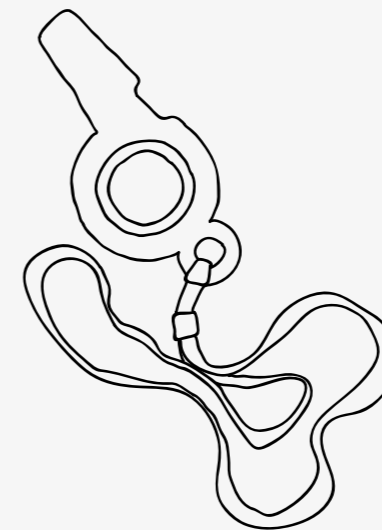
as a strand of work in Citizen Power Peterborough with a focus on the cultural communities and civic engagement **1**. In seeking new ways to make collaboration more effective, the city of Peterborough's leadership adopted the principles and practices of Creative Gatherings in the Innovation Forum begun in 2011 and still flourishing now. In 2013, the RSA and Wiltshire Council began a three-year partnership entitled People Shaped Localism to explore localism in action and how local government services can be reshaped to ensure a more significant role for citizens. Creative Gatherings were a strand of this programme, with an emphasis on the cultural communities in the county.

Two Creative Gatherings were hosted as part of People Shaped Localism, which generated sufficient appetite in the model for Wiltshire's community area partnerships to host and fund the third. Interest in this approach in Wiltshire has grown further and a fourth Creative Gathering was hosted by the Recovery Community three years on from the first one. A core group of participants have remained consistent with all gatherings.

**“ Whenever I come to one of these gatherings, I always find something or someone I didn't know existed. ”**

**-Regular participant at Creative Gatherings**

Creative Gatherings share values, assumptions and approaches with other practices designed to support shared decision-making within communities and between different groups of people. Many in the arts sector would work with the principles and applications here and be familiar with the Creative Gatherings approach, but not use this term. There are also many overlaps in leadership and management development.



## What we mean by 'communities'

The word 'community' is often ill-defined and overly generic. For this resource, we have three types of communities in mind:

- *Communities of place, encompassing groups of people within a geographic space.*
- *Communities of interest, encompassing groups of people with a shared interest or passion.*
- *Communities of practice, encompassing "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" **2***

The various types of communities are not mutually exclusive – for example, communities of place or interest can evolve into communities of practice through platforms such as Creative Gatherings.



## 2. Why Creative Gatherings are important

We live in an age of uncertainty and complexity, and in societies that are more complicated and interconnected than ever. The challenges we face – whether they are in our neighbourhoods, towns, cities or regions – can no longer be managed from the centre, or only by those we deem experts. ‘Innovation’ has become a buzzword, but its growing usage also reflects a real need for fresh ideas and new ways of working that allow us to pull together to strengthen our communities and help people to live better, more prosperous and creative lives. Creative collaboration can help summon the resources of a broad base of society – public institutions, private and third sector organisations, and individuals and communities — to meet challenges in new and better ways.

There are a number of reasons why finding new and more creative ways to work together is more important than ever for public services and communities.

» The causes of, and solutions to, complex social problems are a shared responsibility. Challenges such as chronic ill-health and long-term unemployment cut across the individual boundaries of public, private and social institutions and cannot be tackled by working within organisational silos. Policies such as devolution and public service integration signal a growing appreciation for this.

» New types of ‘networked’ governance are emerging that call into question the

traditional hierarchical, command-and-control model of public management for meeting our social and economic needs. Power and avenues for action are increasingly shared across institutions, sectors, and individuals. ‘Clumsy’ solutions that arise from the interplay between different sources of power are increasingly important **3**.

» **Austerity** and rising demand mean that re-thinking how public services are delivered is no longer an optional extra, but fundamental to ensuring the sustainability of public outcomes. Effective collaboration can enable better joining-up, reduce inefficiencies and avoidable demand, and improve outcomes for people.

» **Community** and social capital has become a critical resource for improving public services and strengthening the relationship between people and the institutions in their place. Rather than seeing people only for their deficits (or ‘needs’), there is now a growing interest in how the knowledge, assets and social capacity of citizens can be summoned to meet social challenges. This means that the old way of engaging with communities

– through hierarchical, overly formalised and technical processes – is no longer fit for purpose. The key cultural and behavioural challenge for public services is learning to work with, rather than do to, people, and restoring the trust between citizens and public institutions. ‘Letting go’ and overcoming a desire for control is an important part of this.

Various forms of collaboration have been developed to meet public policy challenges. The majority have been driven by the need for more effective strategic management to address the limitations of a fragmented public sector. For example, hundreds of shared services arrangements have emerged between local authorities to achieve efficiency savings. ‘Community budgets’ approaches have brought different agencies together within a place to integrate around outcomes in order to reduce duplication and stem demand. At a larger scale, devolution deals are aligning economic development and public service reform with the social and economic priorities of places, building new networks and collaborations through agglomeration and place-making. In a commissioning context, formal partnerships between organisations and sectors are increasingly

providing public services, for example in welfare to work and payment-by-results schemes.

However, collaboration is more than just the strategic integration of organisational structures, a contracting relationship or formal templates for partnership working. At its core, collaboration should be informed by a wider civic purpose so that, as Barry Quirk, Chief Executive of Lewisham Council, proposes: “it is less a management strategy and more a way of thinking and acting” **4**. For Clayton Christensen and colleagues from the Harvard Business School, the two key elements of effective collaboration are a shared sense of purpose and a shared understanding of cause and effect, or how those that are collaborating can achieve what they want **5**. Seen in this context, it is in the neutral, often informal, spaces between institutions and sectors where the greatest creative potential and learning capacity for collaboration and new ideas lies **6**. Developing places where people can come together and work creatively can foster the sort of innovation that is increasingly important for meeting today’s challenges.

*“ We have relied on traditional approaches for too long. Creating creative spaces where conversations can happen in a number of places and with different communities is a vital accessible approach to understanding what is important to people and builds relationships and empathy. ”*

**-Senior Council staff**

## Why creative practice?

An important source of new ideas to tackle today's most pressing challenges lies outside of institutional hierarchies, and in the collective spaces between organisations and sectors where power is more dispersed, imagination is less inhibited and responsibility is bound by a shared purpose. Creativity is a key driver of innovation: RSA learning suggests that giving people the 'power to create' – to turn their ideas into reality – can enable new and better models for social change to emerge and flourish **7**. Our strategic partnerships with Wiltshire Council and previously Peterborough City Council were underpinned by a strong focus on the potential for creative practice to transform public services and support communities.

Arts-based creative practice is often perceived as a luxury, as something that can inspire an 'away day' or lighten up a community event, but is too abstract to support practical transformation. Our research challenges this common view and highlights the tangible ways in which creative practice can shape new and more

effective platforms for civic collaboration. This includes:

» **Promoting** imaginative thinking and unlocking new perspectives. Exploring the emotional and human dimension of issues, creative expression – through techniques such as storytelling, metaphors, humour and design – provokes new ways of thinking, unearths tacit knowledge, shifts perceptions and influences behaviour **8**. Indeed, many management strategists are rejecting traditional 'rational' understandings of knowledge and action – which are narrowly reductive, highly specific and deeply analytical – and promoting a way of knowing that is more emotive, empathic, inventive, and experimental **9**. Uninhibited by rigid structures and tightly controlled agendas, creative collaboration in this context can help cut through the complexity of today's challenges and drive innovation.

» **Supporting** strategic and systemic change. It has become increasingly clear that there is a real appetite in the public sector for working in creative ways to find new solutions. This requires a

strategic and holistic view, and not a piecemeal approach that fails to embed within delivery systems. Creative practice can support the evolution of creative solutions as a part of a broader systemic change but also yield immediate benefits back to those who take part.

» **Fostering** deep connections and relationships to break down barriers. Collaboration is sustained through trust, reciprocity and personal relationships **10**. In public services, shifting from a top-down, patriarchal interaction between citizen and state to one that is more equal and values people's contributions relies on bridging different worldviews. Community engagement often fails because service professionals are seen as 'out of touch,' unable to venture beyond the safety of their highly structured professional boundaries. Creative practice can bridge such divides, and is effective at fostering environments where a diverse range of stakeholders with competing worldviews can develop shared understandings **11**. Creative practice enables the practice of collaboration in an environment that is free from workplace constraints or the silos

around communities of interest. This, in turn, can encourage a willingness to try new things and innovate, which is based upon a lived experience of challenges and possibilities.

» **Providing** a safe space and promoting social inclusion. Collaborative spaces can be informed by the long held practices in participatory arts that build neutral and inviting spaces, carefully curated to contain tendencies for power and control. A range of evidence also underscores the value of creative practice in engaging individuals and groups of people that tend to be excluded from civic life – those that public managers often characterise as 'hard to reach' or 'high need' and engage on the basis of their deficits. Arts approaches, in contrast, regard their life experiences as sources of strength. This ability to put diversity and plurality at the heart of collaborative initiatives is of considerable value given the enduring challenge of engaging people beyond the 'usual suspects'.



# The impact of Creative Gatherings

*“Creative Gatherings are most valuable in breaking down barriers not only between services and the public but across groups in communities as well. We’ve relied on traditional approaches for too long.”*

**-Wiltshire Council representative**

The RSA has held 13 Creative Gatherings: 10 in Peterborough as part of Citizen Power and three in Wiltshire, several of which have been co-hosted and shared with other organisations. They have been seen as effective by participants and have served to underpin these local programmes.

In order to learn from our work in Wiltshire (see ‘Gathering our learning’ on

**page 8**), we held a focus group with participants of the Creative Gatherings. This was followed up with semi-structured interviews with a wider range of stakeholders across sectors. Finally, we held a workshop at the RSA that brought together a cross section of community engagement professionals to reflect on the principles and outcomes of arts-informed practices, including Creative Gatherings.

Data on engagement with three Creative Gatherings reveals two key findings:

- *A consistent core group is maintained and grows throughout the course of the gatherings.*
- *The diversity of participants and their representative groups are widened.*



## Attendees

In Wiltshire, 122 people participated directly in the three Creative Gatherings, while many more became aware of them through networks such as the Wiltshire Forum for Community Area Partnerships. An initial core group of six regular participants increased to 10 over the course of the three gatherings, which helped build ownership of the process.

## Diversity

Creative Gatherings can engage a wider range of professionals and community members than conventional outreach meetings. In Wiltshire, Creative gatherings were held in different towns and in locations that would reach new groups. For example, in Devizes, the museum acting as host encouraged more participants from heritage groups.

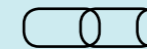
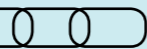
Gatherings reached people working within:

- *Council services such as public health, community engagement officers, cultural services, youth services.*
- *Area board volunteers.*
- *Professional artists and arts and cultural organisations.*
- *The voluntary sector – artists and community volunteers.*
- *Socially engaged arts sector working with marginalised groups.*

## Reach

A Facebook page was established in 2013 and continues to be an actively used resource (<https://www.facebook.com/creativegatheringswilts>). In addition, blogs on Wiltshire community sites and through the regular cultural bulletins distributed through the council have referred to the gatherings.

Creative Gatherings as an approach can leap from one sector and agenda to another. Although the gatherings were targeted primarily towards the cultural



communities, the voluntary community sector picked them up, both funding and hosting one. The recovery community (mental health and addiction services) have adopted them as a means of engagement in Wiltshire.

Based on our interviews and engagement with participants and other stakeholders, there are three key areas that indicate Creative Gatherings had a positive impact in Wiltshire:

### Breaking down barriers and perceived hierarchies

Many participants reported that the Gatherings were effective at breaking down perceived hierarchies and barriers between the organisations, individuals and communities involved. This was attributed to a creative format that emphasises personal experiences rather than expert knowledge. For many, taking part enabled them to re-calibrate their relationships with other services or the council and see other participants ‘in a new light’.

*“Creative Gatherings helped break down perceived hierarchies. When you’ve broken up boxes and paper strings, you’ve engaged on an equal*

*basis, and you’re more likely to contribute.”*

**-Regular participant**

*“Connecting with people at a creative level is liberating. Most people tend to come along to meetings with a rather narrow view, and Creative Gatherings challenge that. By engaging people as creative beings, it shifts those expectations.”*

**-RSA Fellow**

### Creating new connections, civic opportunities and attachment to place

Participants reported that Creative Gatherings helped them to create new and diverse connections and access wider civic and cultural opportunities. On one level this had practical benefits: for example a local artist met a council officer through a Gathering and then subsequently worked with them on a commissioned project. But on a broader level, the Gatherings also fostered a sense ‘community’ and created a stronger attachment to place. This dynamic also helped build stronger

relationships and empathy between participants.

*“I live in Bristol but work in Wiltshire. I’m well connected professionally, but that doesn’t mean I’m well connected with the locality. Creative Gatherings have helped to connect me with the locality more. Several projects that have happened since, have been the result of the knowledge and connections I’ve acquired and the stronger awareness of what’s going on.”*

**-Regular participant**

*“I felt that I was part of something bigger than myself. A community.”*

**-Regular participant**

*“Creating creative spaces where conversations can happen in a number of places and with different communities is a vital accessible approach to understanding what is important to people and builds relationships and empathy.”*

**-Wiltshire Council representative**

*“Whenever I come to one of these gatherings, I always find something or someone I didn’t know existed.”*

**-Regular participant**

### Collective ownership and culture change

One of the most common responses we have heard from participants is that Creative Gatherings allowed challenges and solutions to be collectively owned. This was perceived as being rare in civic initiatives, which tend to be top-down or managed by particular organisations with specific agendas in mind. Through their strong focus on informality, diversity and social inclusion, Creative Gatherings have also been effective at reaching out beyond the ‘usual suspects.’ For example, Creative Gatherings are now being used to support Wiltshire’s recovery community and are creating a new dynamic in the relationship between commissioners, service providers and service users.

*“Creative Gatherings allowed us to contribute equally. Whereas what tends to happen with the council is that they do to you. But in the Gatherings, we were involved in doing it together. They*

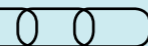
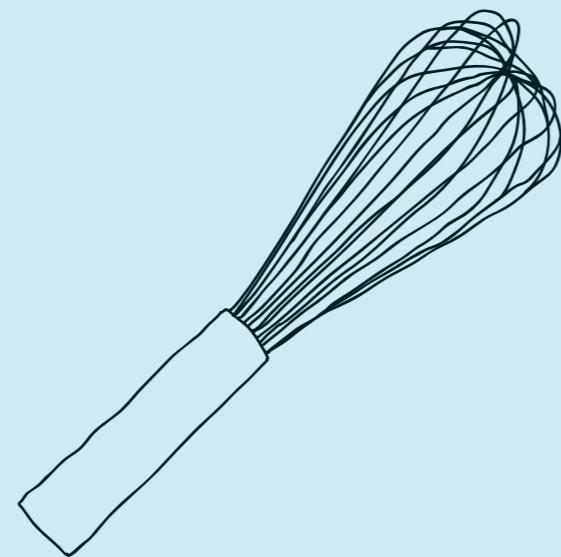


*were about empowering people, not just doing to them.”*

**-Public services consultant, Wiltshire**

*“Creative Gatherings offer us new systems for working together, which is absolutely necessary if we are to achieve culture change. I am a fan of collaborative platforms. Sometimes it’s useful to focus on something else other than ‘the problem’. The creative process enables a greater comfort with uncertainty and exposes us to other views and approaches in ways that are not just about words”*

**-Senior health consultant at RSA workshop**



### 3. What is a Creative Gathering?

Creative Gatherings are meeting spaces with a difference. They are shaped by those taking part and use creative practice as a means of doing so. They bring together a diverse range of people, from a variety of backgrounds, interests and sectors, in order to investigate themes of interest and relevance. The gatherings are neutral forums, facilitated by people with experience of creative practice and offer safe spaces for provocation and challenge that in turn lead to fresh thinking and new perspectives.

In this way, Creative Gatherings build capacities for partnership over time through bringing people together who might not normally interact with each other to explore something that matters to each of them in creative ways. The idea of

a ‘gathering’ is distinct from a traditional meeting. Civic engagement consultant, Peter Block clarifies the term:

*“We use the term ‘gathering’, because the word has more significance than what we think of as just a ‘meeting’. A gathering is hosted; it is the product of an act of hospitality. Meetings are called or scheduled. They are intended for production rather than hospitality... They either review the past or embody the belief that better planning, better managing or more measurement and prediction can create an alternative future. In this way they become just talk, not powerful conversation.”* **12**

What distinguishes a Creative Gathering is the presence of creative practice in the set-up, design and delivery and follow up of the event. It is constructed around shared and bespoke creative activities that unlock new perspectives and deepen thinking around issues or themes of significance to those living and working in a place and can also be effective in bringing people together on the basis of mutual interest or practice. They are part of an approach that is about a whole place and whole person – one that does not perceive a group as characterised by need. Often they are themed around place and what people care about in that place and are effective as part of an ongoing exploration of an inclusive theme because they value diverse contributions and different types of knowledge and experience.

### **A Creative Gathering:**

- » Is a neutral forum that brings people together to explore themes of interest and develop new insights by approaching common questions and challenges differently and creatively.
- » Is hosted in community spaces and typically involves between 30 to 50 people, lasting approximately three

hours.

- » Explores challenging themes that have relevance to a wide range of people, such as the future vision for a place or how communities can develop stronger partnerships with public institutions.
- » Is facilitated by a creative practitioner using arts-based curatorial techniques and imaginative group-based activities such as storytelling, creative reflection exercises, playful activities, and future scenario-building.
- » Is carefully planned and designed to ensure that a diverse range of voices are heard and respected.
- » Offers a very different dynamic to traditional meetings or consultations. The creative techniques help to break down barriers and inhibitions, build trust and nurture new knowledge and thinking.

## **Creativity and creative practice**

Creative Gatherings take creativity seriously. The capacity for creativity lies with everyone and is by no means unique to artists or the arts. It is equally fundamental in all areas of everyday life. Creativity is a word that can both inspire and worry. It can be associated with notions of exclusivity (other people's talents, not our own capacities) and bring up concerns of wooliness or a lack of direction and focus. Genuinely engaging with creativity stimulates our imagination and builds our capacity for innovation, resilience and partnership working. Creativity generates new connections, often from seemingly incompatible frames of thought. Arthur Koestler described it further:

*“The creative act... does not create something out of nothing; it uncovers, selects, re-shuffles, combines, synthesises already existing facts, ideas, faculties, skills.”*

Creative practice is simply the practice of creativity. Within the context of Creative

Gatherings, it draws upon the thinking, processes and structures of the arts (such as theatre, dance, visual art, film or curatorial practice) as channels and catalysts for encouraging reflection and shaping new ways of working. It applies many of the tools of artistic practice in non-arts settings and is a common term within socially engaged arts practice or participatory arts.

Creative practice provokes a radically different dynamic in a room, taking people out of their comfort zones, encouraging cultures of active listening, empathy, reciprocity and imagination. An environment that requires alternate modes of behaviour can be conducive to holding opposing views and challenging dynamics in such a way that enables these tensions to be aired respectfully with nuance and complexity. Creative practice can help us to share experiences and develop the skills and strengths we need to tackle complicated and intransigent problems together.

The following table illustrates how the characteristics of a Creative Gathering are distinct from more common forms of meetings or engagement.



## Creative Gatherings are

Based in creative practice and shared experiences

A forum for building networks or communities of practice

Connecting people who might not otherwise relate to each other

Purposeful in exploring a theme in depth with a range of perspectives

Part of an ongoing series to enable the development of ideas and relationships

Diverse, applying attention to who attends and cuts across sector, roles, age, gender, race, socio-economic dimensions (a sign of success is not knowing others)

Held in different places that hold resonances for different people, with an emphasis on places perceived with some degree of neutrality

Separate to pre-designed initiatives

Able to invite ideas of possibility and encourage a willingness for change

Led by questions. Working with enquiry is helpful in reframing underlying issues and dynamics and is inclusive

Forums that encourage opposing views, dissent and complex perspectives

Convivial and fun and always prioritise the sharing of food in imaginative ways

## Creative Gatherings are not

Talking shops or discussion groups

Pressure groups for a specific issue, mechanisms for social protest, special interest groups

Consultation with specific or perceived 'hard to reach' groups

A solution focused on single issues, but can unlock ways of addressing complex problems

Single events

A group known to itself (the usual suspects)

Associated with a single institution or agenda

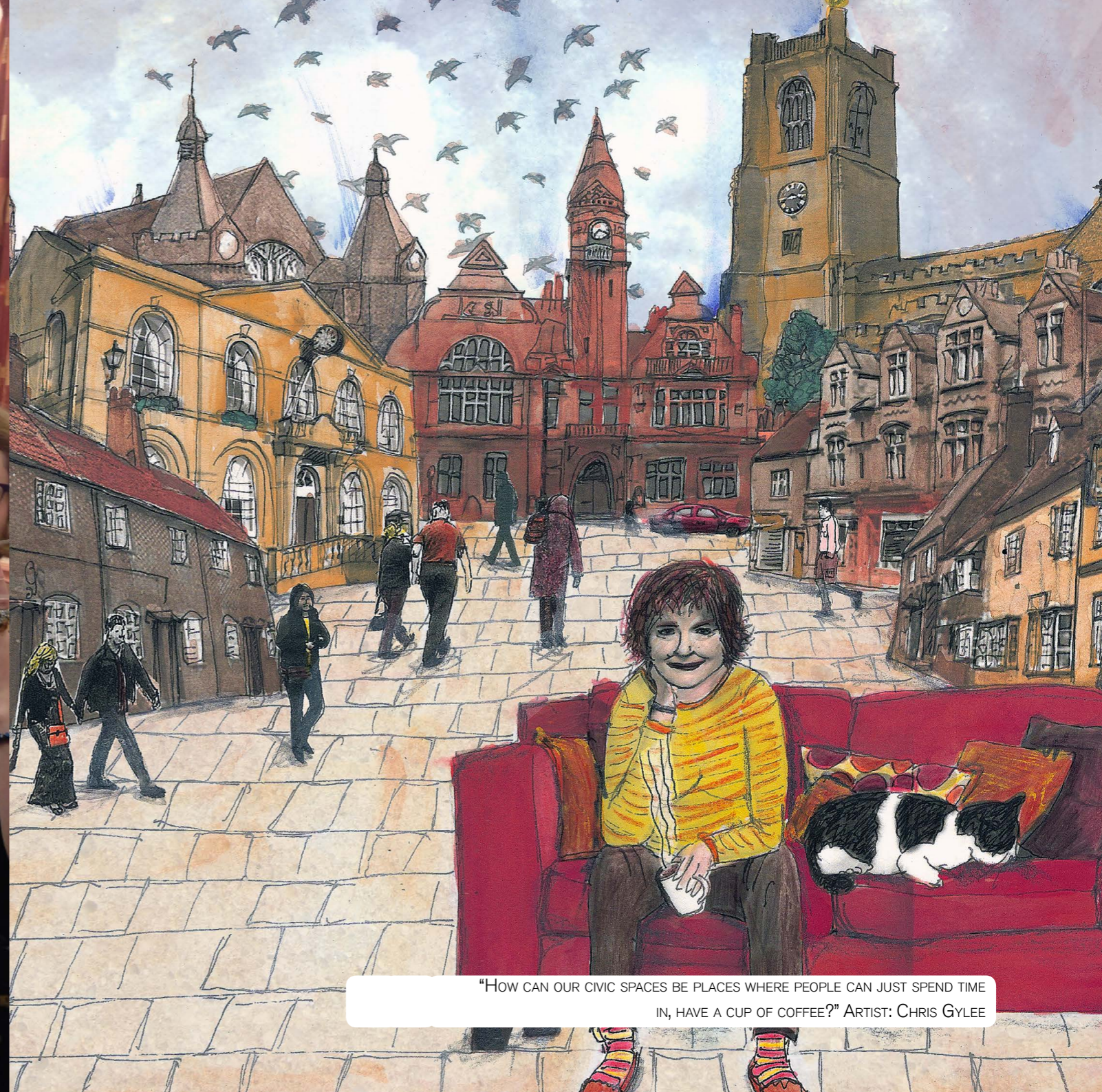
Part of projects, but they can inform and lead to projects

Led by a single idea of change

Led by an assumption

Seeking to establish a one size fits all solution

About sandwiches and a cup of tea



CREATIVE GATHERING, BRADFORD ON AVON

"HOW CAN OUR CIVIC SPACES BE PLACES WHERE PEOPLE CAN JUST SPEND TIME IN, HAVE A CUP OF COFFEE?" ARTIST: CHRIS GYLEE

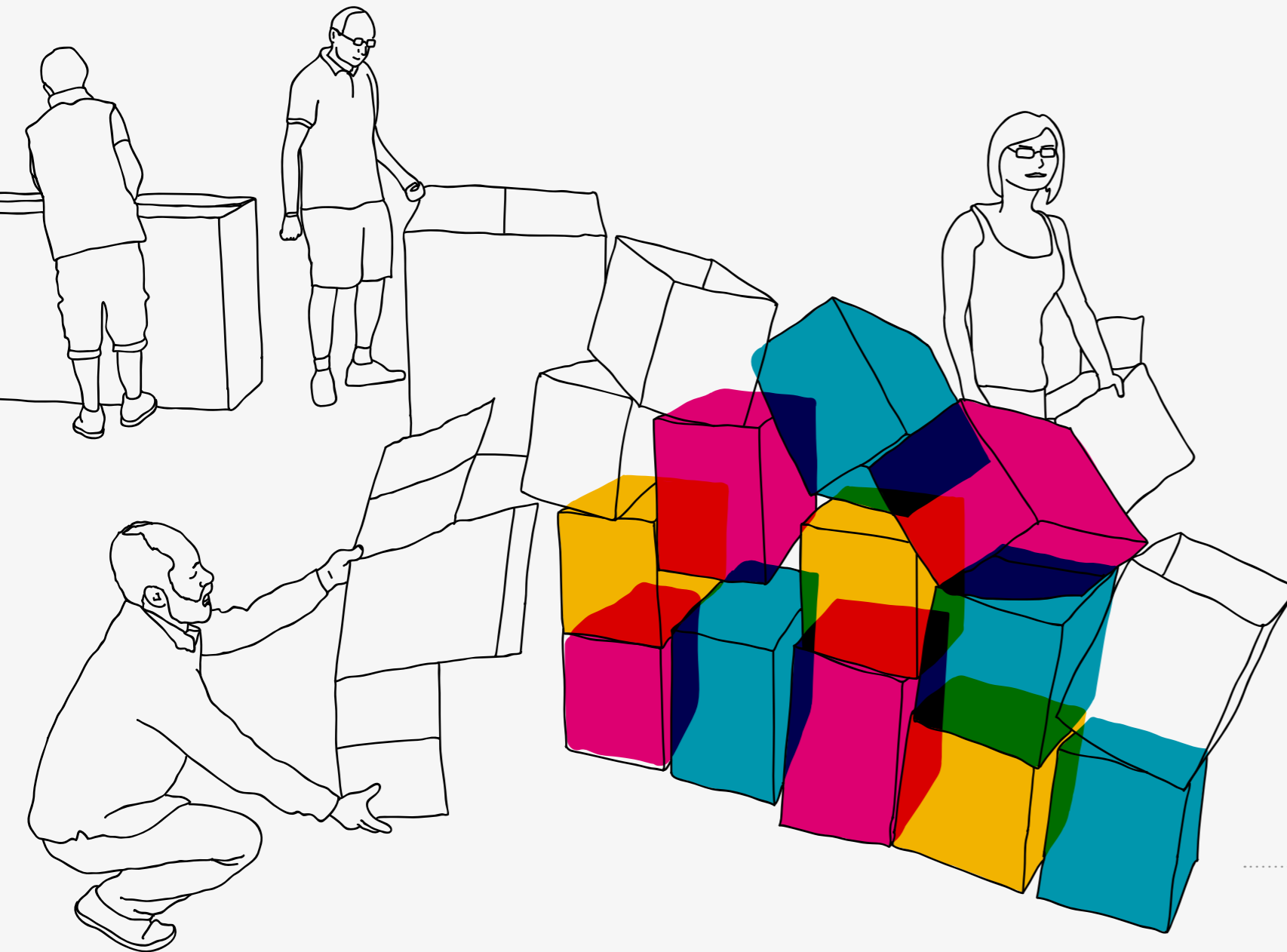
# 4. Putting Together a Creative Gathering

As the previous sections have outlined, Creative Gatherings employ creativity as the core methodology for helping people work together to explore themes and develop new perspectives.

This section provides guidance on how to plan and run Creative Gatherings. It starts with the operating principles that should be kept in mind, before providing practical guidance for designing and delivering Creative Gatherings and connecting them to local civic agendas. This includes illustrative examples from our work in Wiltshire as part of the People Shaped Localism programme.

## Operating principles

The value of imagination and reflection underpin techniques such as the use of metaphors, or narrative storytelling, to help to reframe how people see their role and their understanding of the types of knowledge and contribution that are valued in a collaborative setting. It becomes less about hard facts, analysis and 'rational interaction', and more about shared experiences, collective imagination and creative problem solving.



Creative Gatherings are underpinned by three core, mutually reinforcing principles. These are: neutrality, led by enquiry, and doing together. These principles underpin the practice of Creative Gatherings and inform the strategic delivery of the whole programme from conception to the sustaining of culture change amongst participating organisations and individuals.

### Neutrality

Creative Gatherings, as a collaborative approach, can thrive only insofar as they are able to create neutral environments – or bridging spaces – that enable a diverse range of people to participate outside of the constraints of their organisational or community boundaries. They do this in a number of ways.

#### » Person-centred

Creative Gatherings are “person-centred rather than organisation-centred” **13**. They prioritise the subjective values, experiences and knowledge of people, rather than the social group (or organisation) through which they define their professional and social identities. Participants are encouraged to engage with Creative Gatherings as

individuals, rather than as representatives of organisations. This dynamic helps foster trust, building safe environments in which personal relationships can develop, assumptions can be tested, values explored and new languages created **14**.

#### » Flat landscapes

Creative Gatherings aim to create ‘flat landscapes’ with no discernible hierarchy or power dynamic. The nature of working in creative practice as well as careful facilitation of the gatherings ensures that they are not dominated by certain individuals or perspectives. Close attention is paid to ensuring that those from perceived positions of outside power and authority – such as council officers – are not seen as ‘managing’ the programme.

#### » Challenging the idea of experts

A key element that influences the establishment of a flat landscape is a more inclusive notion of what represents expertise. The themes for the Creative Gatherings are ones that everyone is able to contribute towards and are based upon lived experiences as well as professional or knowledge based expertise, enabling the Creative Gathering to explicitly value all

different forms of expertise on an equal basis.

#### » Diversity of participants

Creative Gatherings bring in a diverse range of individuals, interests and perspectives. This is based on the understanding that diversity generates greater legitimacy, unlocking knowledge, experience and skills from various walks of life and from a range of disciplines. This uncovers new perspectives and creative solutions in a way that initiatives with groups of like-minded people with similar assumptions often struggle with. The link between diversity and creativity and innovation is well established in research **15**.

#### » Neutral spaces

Creative Gatherings emphasise the value of being hosted in neutral, accessible community spaces, such as museums, cafes, colleges, even outside spaces, as opposed to town halls or venues attached to particular organisations. Where they are part of an ongoing process, Creative Gatherings are hosted in different settings to ensure openness and avoid becoming ‘exclusive’ platforms.

*“Networks can all too easily become cliques, rooted in habit and expectation, dominated by the same faces. The nomadic approach taken by the Creative Gathering defers such ownership, ensuring that the endeavour is not attached to one particular place but brings its collective experience into new context.”*

-Richard Ings **16**

#### » Invited Disturbance

Provocation can be introduced in many ways, not least within the diversity of participants; however creative interventions can enable complex and challenging ideas to both be aired in the first place and then explored more fully. This can only be effective once trust is implicit, but it is essential for the efficacy of Creative Gatherings to be a place where difficult matters are addressed. Creativity can enable this to be done in such a way that is not confrontational, divisive or personally challenging.

### Led by Enquiry

One of the most crucial elements of Creative Gatherings is the choice of theme that they are set up to explore. If this

is framed too narrowly, it can skew the neutral space and falls into consultation or oppositional dynamics. Creative Gatherings are best placed to explore broad and complex themes such as place, which has the advantage of attracting a wide diversity of participants.

People attend due to their interest in the questions, which also help to break down the barriers of expertise and shift oppositional and entrenched stances. Creative Gatherings unearth the questions that participants themselves want to investigate, not only the questions that the organising body wishes to address. Broadening and deepening enquiry is a useful way to suspend entrenched habits. Creative practice can help reveal underlying issues and dynamics that can generate new and more effective questions for enabling fresh thinking on change.

### Doing together

#### » The practicing of collaboration

Creative Gatherings emphasise the value of doing, and doing together. They present opportunities to test new ways of working together in safe, alternate environments. Creative practice enables the practice of collaboration in an environment that is

free from workplace constraints or the silos around communities of interest. This, in turn, encourages a greater willingness to try new things and innovate.

#### » Experiencing of difference

It takes patience and courage to escape ‘business as usual’ and the appreciation of what is required to operate differently. Creative practices offer unfamiliar activities and processes that refresh mindsets and attitudes. They facilitate alternate experiences, essential if we are to understand what it takes to operate differently, and cross barriers of professional languages, hierarchies and perceptions of the ‘other’. Translating cultures of working from one discipline to another, from one arts practice to another, from one sector to another, generates new discoveries and can lead to new ways of working together. Creative Gatherings reconfigure relationships through enabling people to perceive each other differently and such changes of perception can have a significant impact on the effectiveness of collaboration.

#### » They are part of an ongoing process

Creative Gatherings provide most value when they are part of an on-going

programme, rather than stand alone, one-off meetings. This also enables them to influence action on the ground and become embedded within the variety of working cultures and communities that make up those participating. Creative processes are dynamic, and it takes time to build trust, foster new relationships and overcome entrenched ways of working. It is therefore important to see Creative Gatherings as opportunities to develop communities of practice around particular themes. An ongoing process is also able to contribute to outcomes by forging a link between participation in the creative process and actions that subsequently flow from this. Participants’ sense of personal effectiveness – and a wider sense that the initiative is achieving something – is essential to enabling creative collaboration to work.

## Applying Creative Gatherings in practice

There are six key stages to consider for establishing Creative Gatherings in practice.

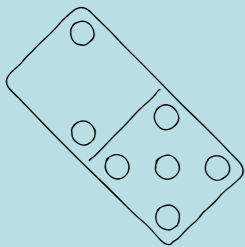
### 1. Identifying a theme and purpose

Choosing a theme, or set of themes, that is appropriate for the Creative Gatherings approach and has local relevance is the first step. Conceive the events as opportunities for learning rather than testing an idea, project or consultation. As part of this:

» **Think** about what the most pressing challenges are locally particularly those that appear to be unresolved and could be more effectively addressed

## Box 1: Working with Questions

Key questions were included in each invitation, helping to underline the idea of attending according to interest in the questions. This also helped to break down perceived barriers as to who belonged in a group and who didn't. Key questions were introduced at the beginning of each event and participants were encouraged to refine them further as well as add to them. Speakers were asked to address the questions rather than use the opportunity for advocacy for their own work. Creative exercises were designed to open out the questions.



with better local collaboration. Local data such as strategic needs assessments (from local authorities) can help with this.

» **Consider** the right scale for Creative Gatherings – will they explore a theme relevant to a particular neighbourhood, or to a town, city or county?

» **Choose** a sufficiently broad theme that can garner local enthusiasm (for example the future vision for a place) rather than one that is highly specific or technical (such as improving the accessibility of community facilities).

» **Develop** a stakeholder map or analysis in order to identify who may have an existing interest and who may need to be engaged further. Always consider potentially surprising stakeholders.

» **Consider** whether the theme is linked to any particular community, social or civic agendas, whether other local initiatives may be exploring a similar theme, and what the involvement of the creative community is in them. Creative Gatherings should seek to build on and

complement what's already happening where this is the case.

This initial thinking and research will help you in the process of finding partners and advocates. The themes themselves can then adapt as the Creative Gatherings evolve.

### Box 1

## 2. Finding partners and advocates

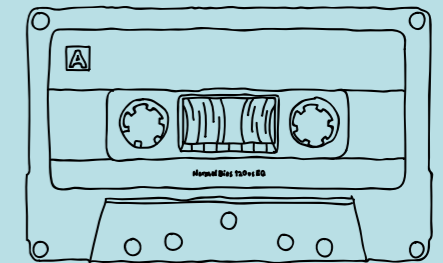
Anyone can set up a Creative Gathering but make sure you have the components in place that enable them to be on-going with a broad range of stakeholders committed to the process.

» **Have** preliminary conversations with a wide range of people that you hope will take part so you are aware of different perspectives first hand. Take care that this would not be perceived as a process owned by any particular group. **Box 2**

» **Seek** to recruit champions or

## Box 2: Making Broad Connections

In Wiltshire, Creative Gatherings were a process that had buy-in from the council from both the arts team and the team supporting the community co-design of multi-purpose community facilities (the Campus Programme). In addition, conversations were conducted with a range of cultural networks, arts organisations and individual artists. Creative Gatherings were seen as a programme that could add value for each of them in different ways.



advocates with local influence – for example those in senior positions, such as service directors or council chief executives. They will be an invaluable resource in generating engagement and connecting Creative Gatherings to key civic and community agendas and outcomes. Articulating the value of Creative Gatherings to local strategic priorities can help with this.

» **Where possible**, develop partnerships with community-rooted organisations or ‘anchors’, such as schools, hospitals and local businesses. They are likely to have an interest in the theme being explored, will help you to build connections with local people (including under-represented groups) and are important to sustaining momentum and supporting the future sustainability of the initiative.

» **If the programme is being set up or supported by a public institution (such as a council) you should seek to recruit a neutral community-based organisation, such as a social enterprise, to lead or help manage it. This will underscore the neutrality of the forum and avoid it being seen as another top-down initiative that is managed by a**

public body for its own purposes.

### 3. Resourcing and setting up

One of the strengths of Creative Gatherings is that the costs can be minimal, with potential for ‘in-kind’ contributions of time and facilities from community partners. Your resource planning should consider:

» **The costs associated with hiring, at least initially, facilitators that are skilled in creative practice and in developing this kind of programme. If you are aiming for this to be a practice that can be embedded into your organisation and sustained in-house, appropriate mentoring or training costs should be considered. We found that nominating a locally based artist or community organiser to shadow the main facilitator worked well as a hand-over process.**

» **Venue and material costs if relevant. If you have established good local connections, spaces for Creative Gatherings can often be donated in**

recognition of the ‘ownership’ of the initiative being shared by the community, as well as the advantages of hosting for the hosting organisation.

» **Always consider the value of offering food and refreshment as a generous gesture, especially for those not sure of what Creative Gatherings might offer them.**

As part of the set-up phase, you will need to:

» **Recruit a creative facilitator that has knowledge and experience of civic engagement and work closely with them to develop the programme.**

» **Select the venue(s) carefully – for example ensuring that it is neutral and accessible, or locally cherished.**

» **Engage with the lead for the space you are using as a co-designer wherever possible. Try not to use the space as a rental only but as an opportunity for new relationships that would be helpful for participants as well as the strategic leads for the space. Be nomadic. Use different places to host during the**

## Box 3: Co-hosting With Your Venues

The Creative Gathering in Devizes was held in the Wiltshire Heritage Museum and the museum director was a co-designer for the event and a co-host. In this way, the event was able to offer the director an opportunity to engage with potential new allies and stakeholders and introduce many of the participants to a new space for future use. As a result, the event had the luxury of being able to engage with the whole museum throughout the event, as opposed to a single room.

The museum director asked everyone to explore the museum and bring back ‘findings’ to share in the whole group. He then facilitated a discussion on their perceived barriers to engagement with museums and was interested in building upon the idea of the museum being a dynamic opportunity for discovery, one that could generate creative ideas across a range of sectors and communities.

process. This helps to reinforce Creative Gatherings as not attached to either a specific locale or institution. **Box 3**

## 4. Promoting the Creative Gathering - the invitation

Effectively promoting the Creative Gatherings can generate local interest and help ensure that you are able to engage a diverse range of participants from different walks of life. As part of this, you will need to:

» Pay attention to the nature of the invitation and the way in which you present and communicate the Creative Gatherings, including the language you use. Make sure you are inviting people to an event they will get something out of alongside a sense of ease, conviviality and informality. Signal that these Gatherings will be different and be confident about inviting curiosity. Ensure that invitations are sent out by

others as well, which will also support the perception that this is not owned by a single party. Avoid giving any impression that the gatherings will be expert-led or highly formalised. **Box 4**

» **Research** effective ways to identify people by working through your networks of partners and advocates, especially ‘anchor’ organisations, that are likely to have existing relationships with people from various walks of life.

» **Coordinate** this process effectively so that you have an idea of who has expressed an interest and who may be attending. This will be challenging as invitations are not centrally controlled and some people may not be able to RSVP through email or phone.

## 5. Designing and delivering the gathering

This requires careful planning, building upon the conversations you have had with those you have engaged in preliminary conversations, as well as the facilitator

## Box 4: Open and Inclusive Invitations

We found that the wording for invitations was most effective when it was deliberately open and inclusive such as:

we asked participants who had been before to bring a friend.

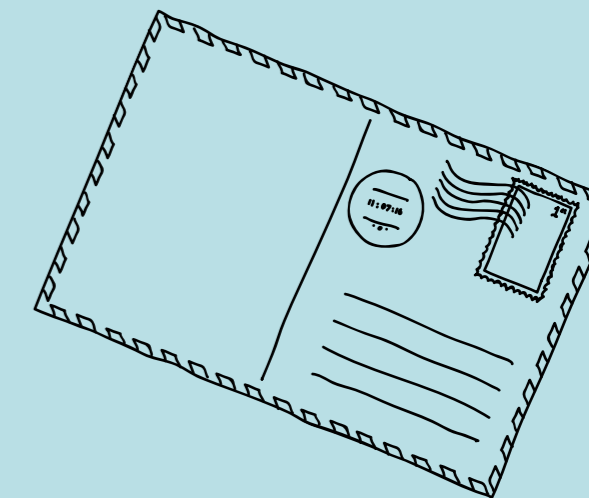
*“The Creative Gathering is open to all those who live and/or work in Wiltshire that are a part of the cultural community, be this as an artist of any artform, a project manager, a museum curator, a community choir – anyone who feels that creative practice is a central part of their lives.”*

Or

*“Anyone who does something community based.”*

This will help the Creative Gathering include those not thought of in previous engagement or network strategies.

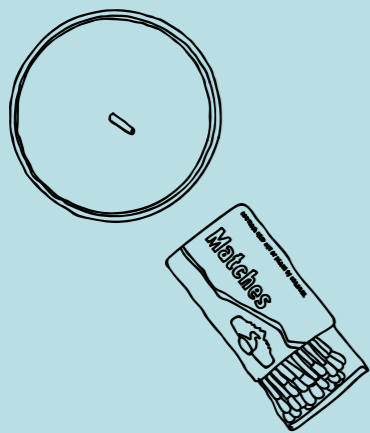
We also found that including good visuals with invitations that linked to what people did or where they lived made a positive difference. As the Gatherings developed,





## Box 5: Build on Participants' Expertise

If the activity at a Gathering is designed to uncover new ideas and aspirations and build on participants' expertise, then this will naturally lead to further themes for future Gatherings. Individuals will come forward to co-facilitate future Gatherings. In Wiltshire, we continually urged the cultural community to bring non-arts partners. One regular participant came up with the idea of a joint Creative Gathering with the countywide community action network.



and the owner of the space you are using. As the Creative Gatherings become an ongoing process with regular participants, participants will shape the design. Keep in mind the following key considerations as you design and deliver the Creative Gathering.

» **Ensure** you have someone from within the community you are engaging with as a partner in conceiving, organising and delivering the programme. The importance of the personal and reflective voice is vital to establish at the beginning or you run the danger of opposing positions being adopted. This reflective and personal voice needs to be modelled by invited speakers with clear briefs on this approach. **Box 5**

» **The** optimal size can be flexible; our Creative Gatherings regularly hosted between 40 and 50 people but they would work equally well with 20. Much less than 20 and it might not be reaching the necessary diversity of people you are seeking. Equally, the diversity of participants also affects the numbers of Creative Gatherings

necessary for a self-sustaining community of practice to emerge.

» **Creatively** address the venue you are in and imaginatively build a space that is stimulating and inviting, signalling that this is a bit 'different'. A circle of chairs rather than theatre style is a critical factor. **Box 6**

» **The** creative activities need to be at the centre of the design of the forum. Don't be shy about the creative activity or engage with it as an 'ice breaker' or secondary activity to discussion. Start as you mean to go on. If the activity is well designed and facilitated, that is the central generator of ideas, discussion and the building of relationships. Design bespoke and purposeful activities that address both the participants' strengths and needs. **Box 7**

» **Activity** needs to be fun and inviting with no overtones of professional development or 'away days'. Avoid the tendency to record the Gathering with minutes in traditional forms. We commissioned local artists to respond to what happened and distributed this to participants.

» **Don't** be cautious about introducing provocation. This could be in the form of invited guests, but in particular, this is an area that creative practice is particularly helpful with airing diverse and opposing views in a space that is safe to do so.

» **Make** sure that each Creative Gathering has a clear purpose that is well communicated and gives participants a sense of why they are there and what they are contributing towards. This doesn't mean you need to brief them on each activity beforehand – remember that surprise and intrigue are important elements of Creative Gatherings.

## 6. Following through

Creative Gatherings offer most value where they are part of or relate to an evolving programme of work rather than isolated events. They are also action-based, rather than talking shops: people are brought together to achieve shared outcomes and create the conditions for change. Following through is therefore

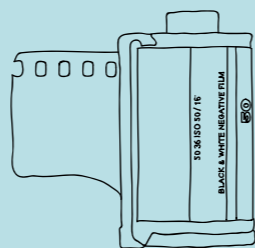
## Box 6: Using The Space

First impressions matter. The space should signal both ease and difference. A warm personal welcome from someone who knows many of the attendees is helpful, especially given that the Creative Gathering is reaching out to a diverse group. There is a danger that participants will perceive they are the odd one out. A measure of success in Creative Gatherings is the perception that other participants are unknown and that this represents a new grouping of people. Personally visit the venue to check out how this choice can offer the right environment.

In Bradford on Avon, the first Creative Gathering was held in a central location in a well-used church hall (as opposed to locations associated with the arts). Walls were covered with key questions such as ‘What makes Wiltshire distinctive creatively?’ with blank cards for responses. The small stage was full of curious and unusual objects – ironing board, colourful objects, paper, paint – with homemade baked goods and tea available to ease people into the event.

The large circle of chairs can be problematic if the group is too large but we would recommend addressing this creatively as opposed to having a second row or splitting into smaller groups. Latecomers are included in the circle.

The Creative Gathering in Westbury had photographs taken by local residents in a recent arts project and facts on future projections for 2034 regarding population growth, working patterns, climate change and so on. Attendees were encouraged to have a warm drink and have a look. As they did so, large open cardboard boxes were spread all over the floor, along with tape, scissors and coloured pens. An atmosphere of playfulness is essential but this needs care in introducing in ways that do not cause discomfort.

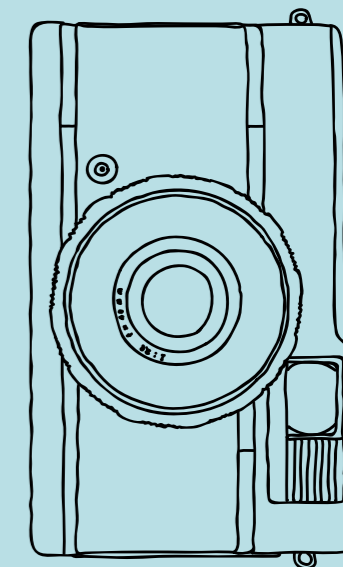


## Box 7: Creative Activity

There are descriptions of three Creative Gatherings within Wiltshire in the appendix but here is an example of how creative activity is part of the core design of all elements.

The third Creative Gathering asked participants to use cardboard boxes in the middle of the room to create a town in Wiltshire in 2034 and asked all to consider the following questions: What is in it? What do you need? What do you imagine? Participants were able to work individually or in groups and time was given to enable participants to continually alter their decisions. Occasionally a provocation was introduced to ensure this creation enabled conversations based on realistic projections like population growth and transport. A silent reflection to notice choices was facilitated midway through the creative process and then followed by a discussion on choices made. Those contributing their ideas were encouraged to stand in the ‘town’ as they rationalised their choices. Throughout the event, participants were encouraged to move their choices as opposed to describing their changes of mind. This created a dynamic and direct

interaction. The purpose of this design was to challenge existing group dynamics with an accessible and playful exercise that required imaginative, thoughtful and informed choices predicated upon possibility.



important and it is worth taking account of the following:

» **Creative** Gatherings need to evolve and grow in such a way that directly reflects what happens at each Gathering, so that each Gathering informs the next. It is important therefore to have a structure/ programme that enables you to be responsive to what may arise.

» **Should** the initial Creative Gatherings be enthusiastically welcomed, a minimum of three to five would be a working guideline for the optimum number of gatherings necessary for impact. A crucial factor is the length of time between gatherings and it is important to keep momentum going. We have learned that a three-month gap or less works best.

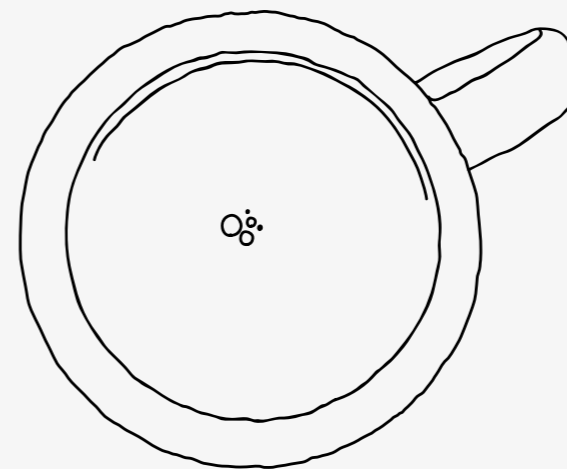
» **Creative** Gatherings need to achieve tangible outcomes. These can be defined and clarified at a broad level in the set-up stage (for example one broad outcome may be building social capital between communities), but specific outcomes need to go hand-in-hand with the nature of an open-ended

forum rather than imposed from the top-down, so that they are shaped and contributed to by participants. Actions arising from Creative Gatherings must link directly with participants' contributions and be communicated widely in those represented communities. **Box 8**

» **Keeping** track of development is also vital, and an appropriate and practical platform for this should be used: many Creative Gatherings may not, for example, be suitable for quantitative evaluations. Sharing what happens and potential learning as well as participants' narratives can be important for building momentum and influence. Creative techniques can also be used for this – for example, an inspiring piece of artwork may be better at demonstrating an outcome than a written report.

» **Seek** to understand how Creative Gatherings might contribute to key local civic and social action agendas. This, in turn, can provide the basis for building new partnerships and, vitally, complementing what's already taking place locally.

» **Creative** Gatherings must aim to be sustainable. This is less an issue of cost (they are relatively low-cost to set up), and more about being realistic about scale and ambition. Creative Gatherings are more likely to be sustainable where they engage relatively small groups of people over time, building inclusive communities of practice (or interest) where participants feel a strong sense of ownership. Sustaining strong relationships with local leaders and civic organisations should also be a key part of this.



## Box 8: Being Responsive

We were aware of the county's cultural community's need for more knowledge sharing opportunities and interest in meeting artists of different art forms and from different parts of the county as a result of early meetings across the wider community. At the first Creative Gathering, participants were asked to contribute to a 'Tell Us' board with what they knew was happening in their area. This led to the development of a Facebook site that continued this function. This also supported the idea that expertise in this lay with those who attended as opposed to being led by institutions.

Another example of this was the 'Asset Swap' exercise at the third Creative Gathering where ideas and offers from a wide range of participants (such as use of space or acting as a sounding board) were shared. This was then set up as the beginning of a database by the co-hosts of this event. It was particularly helpful in ensuring participants had something 'to take away'.



CREATIVE MAPPING  
CREATIVE GATHERING IN DEVIZES





## 5. Summary and Health Warning

Creative Gatherings are not a panacea. They do not fit neatly into conventional frameworks for community consultation or solving problems that focus on measurement, outputs and performance targets. Because they draw on creative approaches that confront entrenched cultures and ways of working, there are a number of challenges to setting them up and ensuring that they have a meaningful local presence. These have been explored throughout the resource, but it is worth emphasising and fleshing out the key challenges and imperatives to keep in mind.

### Leadership, advocacy and funding

Encouraging people to step outside of their comfort zones – to engage in activities that are unfamiliar, unusual and at times bewildering – can be a challenge for those that are used to the structure and certainty of traditional meetings and consultation-based engagement. Our research underscores the value of having champions and advocates from the beginning, particularly senior local leaders, who can stimulate participation in Creative Gatherings, keep momentum going and ensure that they are linked to agendas for change and fresh thinking. It is important to bear in mind the source of funding for this approach. If funding comes from a particular source such as a

council, it can be perceived as traditional consultation. As we have identified, it is critical to have ‘an honest broker or intermediary’ as the delivery body.

## Embracing the unknown

Creative Gatherings require patience and courage as they step outside normal behavioural patterns. We have understandable habits of needing to know the rationale for new approaches, particularly if they are unfamiliar, but this can inhibit the possibility of discovery and experimentation for new ways of working together. This also runs the risk of weighting towards a particular agenda or solution-focused approaches. New solutions are by definition unknown and need to be uncovered in unexpected ways. Parameters of the gathering can be predetermined by those putting the programme together but outcomes must be owned by participants. Encouraging public sector leaders in particular to engage in a process without knowing how (or even if) it adds value is a challenge that requires patience and the tolerance of doubt.

*“ This cannot be a single activity but has to be over time and through different strands of activity. The hardest thing is to sustain those relationships over time. ”*

**-Senior Council staff**

## Thinking carefully about themes and outcomes

The choice of themes that link Creative Gatherings must ensure that a broad body of people would be curious enough to contribute without suspicion that this forms a part of defined agendas. Curiosity can be an underrated motivator and if the Creative Gatherings are run well, there will be a consistent core group that continues to engage with them. At the same time, continual effort must be made to broaden the participating group as the Gatherings mature, to make sure the perception of a clique is avoided. They should be perceived not as individual projects or initiatives to achieve certain targets, but as a different kind of collaborative working practice to strengthen people and places. This values an on-going dialogue but also one that is linked to a tangible sense of outcomes and achievement – where participants can feel the initiative is making a difference.

*“ Embedding these approaches are the hardest thing to do – they work out of normal everyday activity and they need different skillsets. The arts communities are best placed to do this work but need champions within services to help them thrive from within a service. ”*

**-Senior Council staff**

## The importance of skilled facilitation

Finally, the skillset of facilitation cannot be underestimated and requires careful and considered casting. It is important that those from perceived positions of outside power and authority – such as council officers – are not seen as ‘managing’ the initiative. Credible intermediaries, for example a trusted local social enterprise, can be hugely valuable as facilitating organisations for Creative Gatherings. As we have suggested, this role should be shared with others, be this venue or community or sector hosts, as well as those participating, whenever this fits the theme. However it would be wise to consider the following skills of the leading and consistent facilitator throughout the programme:

- » A **background** in facilitative leadership, highly skilled in enabling others to take on leading roles as co-designers and co-facilitators.
- » Able to ‘hold’ a variety of diverse

and often conflicting perspectives within the Gathering, without enforcing a false consensus.

- » Needs to be perceived as neutral. Of course, many will not know the facilitator prior to the Gatherings but their independence from any one group would be critical.
- » **Holds** credibility across hierarchies, with heads of services, middle management and citizens and communities of interest. To have credibility and rapport with a particular one of these single echelons would skew the Creative Gathering.
- » **Willing** to mentor a local player or organisation to take the programme further or be equipped to deliver a similar programme in the future.
- » A strong background in creative practice working in applied settings. This does not necessarily mean a background in the arts at all but a deep understanding of how creativity can unlock new ways of working together.



*“ The creative process enables a greater comfort with uncertainty and exposes us to other views and approaches in ways that are not just about words. Fundamentally it offers us new systems for working together, absolutely necessary if we are to have a culture change at all. Change is superficial at best if not. ”*

**-Senior Health Consultant**



# Appendix

## A description of three Creative Gatherings in Wiltshire

This set of Creative Gatherings formed a strand of People Shaped Localism, each taking place in different locations in Wiltshire. The following summary identifies the theme and objectives of each Gathering, together with a description of some of the creative exercises that responded to the specific briefs for each one and the rationale for these choices.

### Creative Gathering 1

#### Bradford on Avon

In a well-used church hall in the centre of town.

#### Theme/ title

Reflecting on Place

Participants: approximately 45 – 50 people from across the county spanning a wide range of backgrounds, including council staff and those from professional and voluntary arts backgrounds, as well as the wider creative industries such as graphic design and journalism. Invitations were worded to be inclusive to the wider cultural communities: “The Creative Gathering is open to all those who live and/or work in Wiltshire that are a part of the cultural community, be this as an artist of any artform, a project manager, a museum curator, a community choir – anyone who feels that creative practice is a central part of their lives.”

#### Objectives

» To bring together people from across Wiltshire, and particularly from Bradford on Avon who consider themselves to be a part of the cultural



community, in order to support the development of a cultural county wide network.

» To reflect upon the relationship between art and place at a local level.

» To introduce the idea of community campuses and generate enthusiasm for contributing to this idea.

» To learn about the needs of the cultural community and where the gaps are in provision for these needs.

### Environment

» Effort was made to transform the space to create surprise and curiosity. All the walls were covered with artists' responses, commissioned earlier in the programme, together with key questions such as 'What makes Wiltshire distinctive creatively?'. Blank cards for responses were placed next to each question.

» A local person who knew most attendees welcomed everyone.

» A small stage was full of found objects: an ironing board, musical

instruments, colourful objects, paper and paint.

» **Homemade** baked goods and warm drinks were immediately available.

### Creative activity

#### » Activity 1:

The gathering began with a creative mapping exercise. Everyone taking a leading role in the event (from local community activist to the local authority lead for culture to artists leading on particular exercises) introduced themselves through imagining a space in the middle of the group circle as the globe, describing key points in their lives by physically moving to different spots of the room. Guiding questions for this exercise included the following, interpreted as each person saw fit:

- *I grew up in...*
- *I first became interested in the arts and culture in...*
- *I studied in...or learned from in...*
- *What brought me to Wiltshire was...*
- *My favourite place in Wiltshire is...*

Creative introduction techniques will enable participants to see each other through what they offer in terms of ideas and imagination rather than perceived status. The purpose of this activity was to establish a flat landscape through an informal and playful introduction to who was in the room. This helped to encourage reflections on place from different perspectives, leading to personal considerations as well as humour, which in turn helped to break down initial barriers.

#### » Activity 2:

Participants shared their own creative activity at a local level in small groups and considered how this might intersect with their own notions of citizenship and wider civic ambitions. Each group then created a response that outlined their discussion, using the found materials available. This was done with movement, sound, scripted performance and the sculpting of objects, and was fed back to the whole group, followed by discussion.

The purpose of this activity was to enable a wide variety of expressive modes, engaging with metaphor or movement, which communicated complex ideas that often contained conflicting perspectives.

It avoided the tendency to only hear from those comfortable with verbal articulacy and helped to build relationships through working together within a playful task.

## Creative Gathering 2

### Devizes

Wiltshire Heritage Museum

### Theme/ title

Reflections on Cultural Engagement

Approximately 40 – 45 people attended, a mix of those who attended the first gathering, those from the Devizes area and those new to Creative Gatherings. Participants were asked to consider engagement as a theme prior to the event and bring contributions of food inspired by personal connections to place.

### Objectives (in addition to objectives from first Gathering)

» To include the museum sector as a key contributor and the museum

director as a co-designer in the activities.

» To generate an honest conversation about civic activity and the barriers and opportunities for engagement with this.

» To share food as a deliberate dynamic in building connections and a sense of shared ownership of the event.

» To ensure a wide range of provocations so there was not a single prevailing view.

### Environment (key components)

» The whole museum was the setting, not just the meeting room.

» The room was well-sized for this number of people and with plenty of light.

» The table for food contributions was covered by blank paper, and people were asked to write next to their contribution what their dish referenced in their lives.

### Creative activity

#### » Activity 1:

The gathering began with everyone pairing with someone they did not know to share the first time they became personally engaged with a cultural experience, reflect on what engaged them in particular and consider what factors influenced this engagement. People were encouraged to find a space in the museum for this conversation and bring back ‘findings’ to share with the whole group. People then shared their partner’s reflections with the whole group.

The intent was to begin with enquiry and reflection in order to set the tone for the level of thoughtfulness necessary and develop a sense of ownership of the museum space. The sharing of another’s reflections highlighted the importance of listening. The museum director facilitated a discussion on perceived barriers to engagement with museums.

#### » Activity 2:

A broad range of speakers were asked to respond to the following question: ‘What question about engagement is important for me?’. Contributors ranged

from the director of Devizes Street Arts Festival, the director of Wiltshire Youth Arts Partnerships, to the director of an organisation that creates spectacles at a national level, and a practitioner working with adults with learning difficulties through theatre in Devizes.

This activity required reflective responses to enquiry as opposed to the traditional ‘what I/we do’. The breadth of short contributions meant that there was not only a wide scope of activity and approach but also that they reflected work at different geographical locations. These perspectives acted as a provocation for the remaining creative exercises.

#### » Activity 3:

A very large piece of paper representing the county of Wiltshire filled the space in the middle of participants’ seating. Participants were asked to write or draw the places on this paper where they perceived interesting or emerging creative arts activity, and were encouraged to document more hidden activities as opposed to identifying the obvious (ie arts centres). It was necessary to remove shoes to do so and to walk over the whole paper.

Everyone was then asked to notice other contributions and add further detail.

The purpose of this activity was to make visible the less visible activity in such a way that all contributions and kinds of knowledge were valued. It positioned place as a tangible element as opposed to an abstract idea: ‘this is happening here’. The large piece of paper became an exciting resource in the room and was revised continually over the later communal meal.

#### » Activity 4:

Everyone was asked to consider what tools they might have to contribute to this prolific activity and to document what they were interested in learning further about. This was captured in a wide range of coloured post-it notes indicating whether this was a question, a tool they might offer, or an idea, which were placed on the larger paper on the floor. This then became a gallery of ideas for discussion over food.

# Creative Gathering 3

In partnership with Wiltshire Forum for Community Area Partnerships (WfCAP)

## Westbury

Westbury Leigh Community Hall

### Theme/ title

A Sense of Place (subtitled: a collaborative event celebrating community and creativity)

A slightly larger group of approximately 50 – 60 people with an even mix of those from the creative community and those from community activism were present. The invitation asked everyone to bring a guest with them who “does something community based”. This event was funded by WfCAP and acted as their annual gathering. As with the previous Creative Gathering, attendees were asked to bring a dish that expressed the idea of summer.

### Objectives (in addition to previous Gatherings)

- » To co-design the event with WfCAP and the cultural producer of Pass it On – the RSA commission.
- » To conduct a future visioning exercise for Wiltshire that enabled fresh thinking about potential change.
- » To bridge the two distinct communities taking part and find commonalities.
- » To introduce creative approaches to the community development sector.

### Environment (key components)

- » A newly restored church hall in a suburban setting, easy parking, easy to find, very pleasant space.
- » **Walls** were covered with photos of Westbury residents taken as part of a project conducted by photographer Penney Ellis, together with facts on future projections for 2034 focusing on population and demographic growth, working patterns, climate change, etc.

» People were asked to place their food contribution on a table covered by blank paper, and were asked to write next to it how their dish referenced summer for them.

» **The floor** was covered with cardboard boxes of all sizes, masking tape, scissors and coloured pens. Some boxes had been constructed to represent townscapes.

### Activity

#### » Activity 1:

As participants arrived they were encouraged to explore this space, observe what was on the walls, then begin to use the cardboard in the middle of the room to create the place that they would most want to live in in 20 years time, taking into account some of the future projections identified. They were asked to consider the following questions: What is present? What do you need? What do you imagine? Participants were able to work individually or in groups and time was given to enable them to continually alter their decisions. Occasionally a provocation was introduced, to ensure this creation enabled debate and conversations based on realistic projections such as

population growth and transport. A silent reflection to notice choices was facilitated midway through this process, followed by a discussion on choices made. Anyone contributing ideas was encouraged to stand in the ‘town’ as they rationalised their choices, as were the later invited speakers. Throughout the event, participants were encouraged to move their choices as opposed to describing their changes of mind. This created a dynamic and direct interaction.

This activity was the dominant creative exercise of the event and necessitated continual reference to the group creation, which continued through to the communal meal. It challenged existing group dynamics through an accessible and playful exercise that required imaginative, thoughtful and informed choices, which also generated debate on the kinds of communities we want.

#### » Activity 2:

An artist facilitated an exercise that asked each participant to pair with someone they didn’t know and to go for a short walk whilst discussing the following questions

that arose from the recently created cardboard community:

- *What elements from your working lives would you like, or not like, to bring to this place?*
- *What from your lives in general would you want to highlight here?*
- *When you walk around silently take time to listen for what you might be missing – we'll ask about this when you get back.*

The suggested process for the walk was:

- *Walk one way down the street – one person talks, the other listens.*
- *Walk the other way – one talks, the other listens.*
- *Walk around the building, without speaking, both listening, noticing what you see.*

This was followed by a discussion on two things: the content discussed and the process of listening while walking.

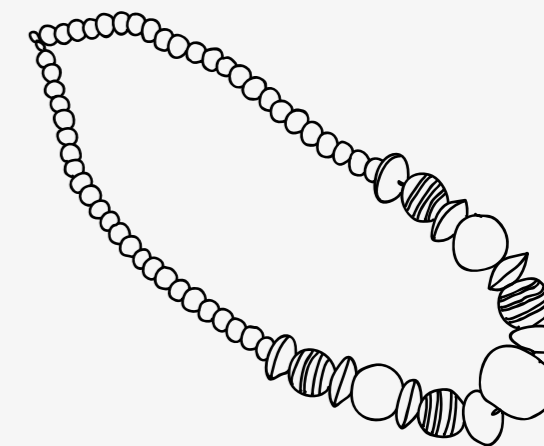
The purpose of this activity was to further refine ideas about the future town, based on individual reflections that also incorporated the personal, and

to introduce the ideas of walking and listening.

» **Activity 3:**

Asset Swap. Everyone was asked what they might find practically useful in community development, and to share their knowledge of practical tools such as meeting spaces with someone prepared to child sit or act as a sounding board. This was facilitated by the co-ordinator of WfCAP, and in order to ensure this was considered thoughtfully, the exercise was modelled first. Over food there were further opportunities to add more and build upon what others had offered. WfCAP then documented and distributed the results as the start of a database of assets, after permission to share contacts had been checked.

The purpose of this was to conclude the event with a practical and easy mechanism to enable continued networking, and to ensure that people felt there was something 'to take away' – particularly important for visioning exercises which people might feel were too abstract or aspirational.



# Endnotes

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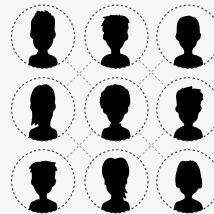
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**ISBN: 978-0-901469-84-7**