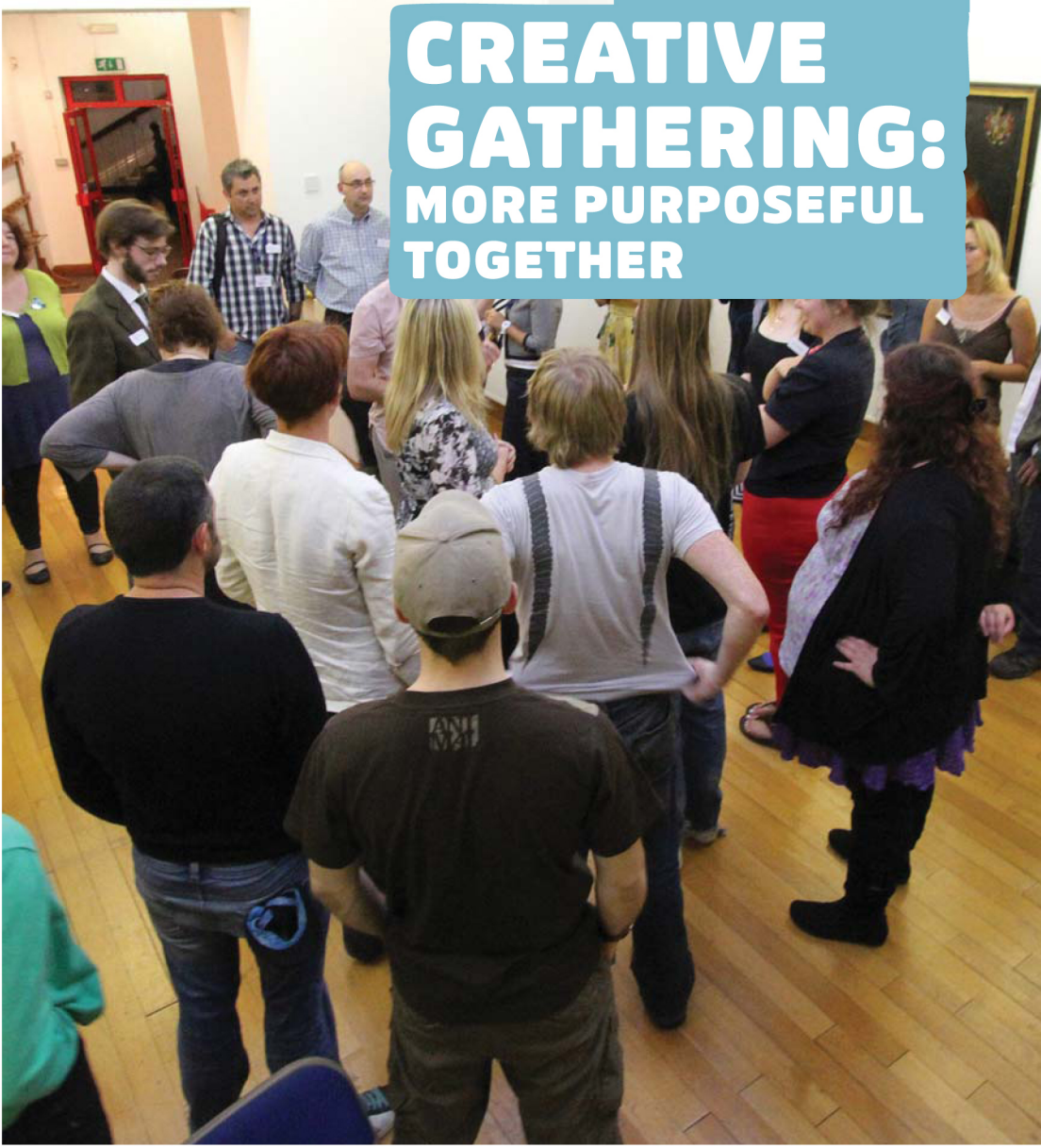
Case study 2

Arts and Social Change

CREATIVE GATHERING: MORE PURPOSEFUL TOGETHER



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People. Create. Change.

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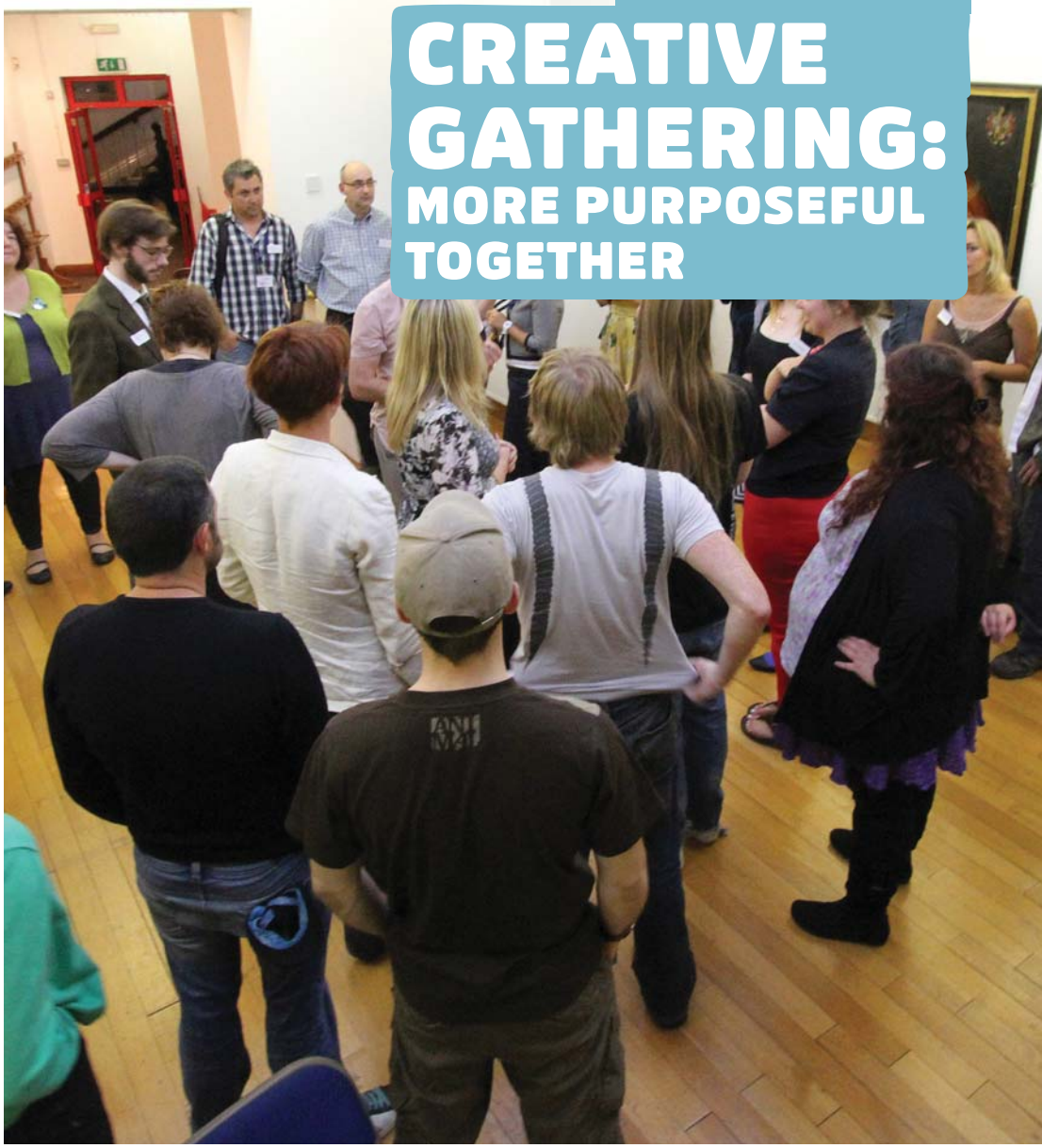

↑ Creative Gathering 2: Place making

↗ Creative Gathering 1: Creative Enquiry

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People. Create. Change.

This case study is the second 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 have contributed to the aims of Citizen Power and uncover some of the inherent challenges we encountered, in the hope that these may prove useful for similar initiatives.

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

Citizen Power: **www.citizenpower.co.uk**
Creative Peterborough: **www.creativepeterborough.com**
Vivacity: **www.vivacity-peterborough.com**
The Map: **www.mapconsortium.com**
The RSA: **www.thersa.org**

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 2
CREATIVE GATHERINGS:
MORE PURPOSEFUL TOGETHER

> “People are more purposeful together.”
>
> Artist reflecting on a Creative Gathering

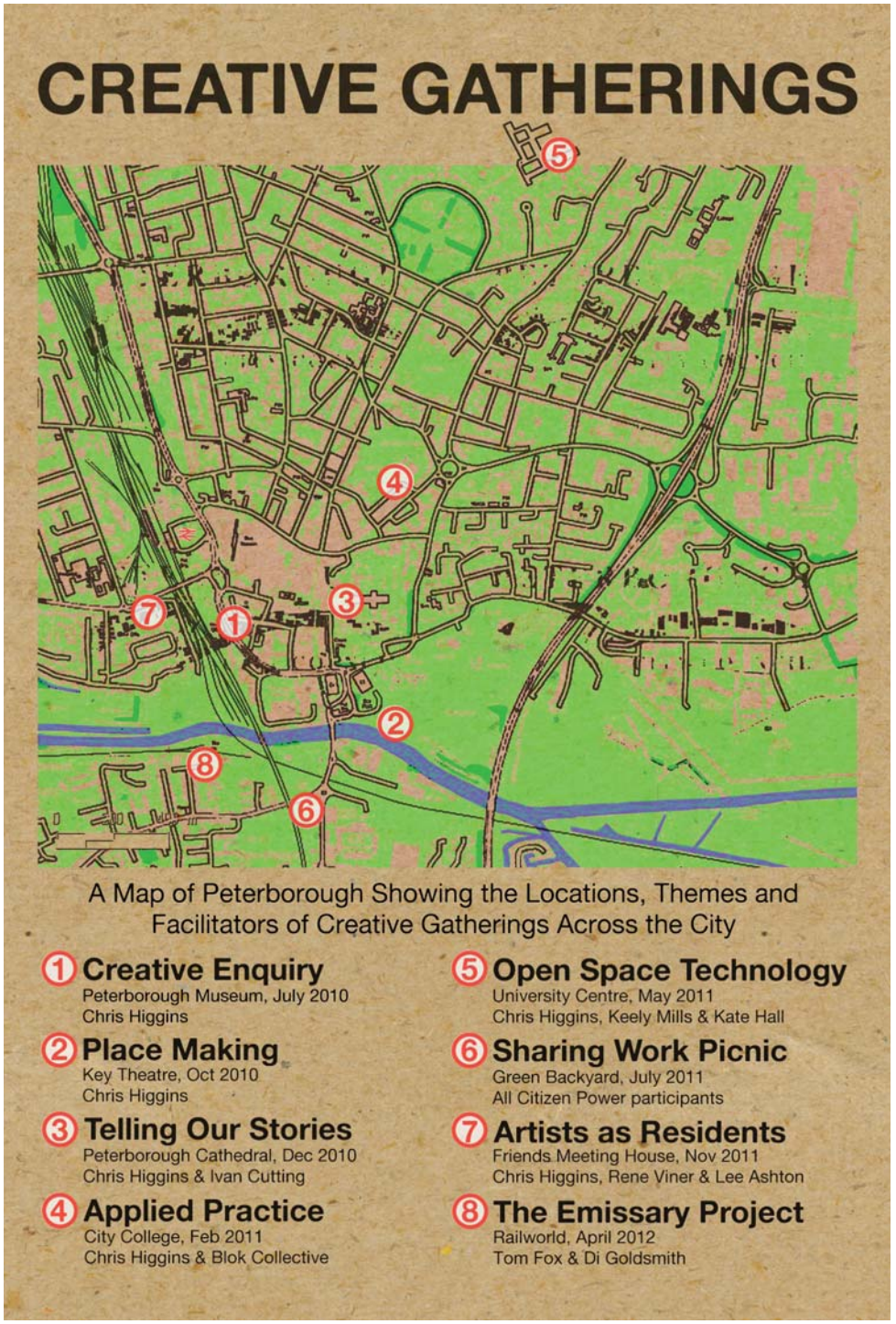
INTRODUCING THE CREATIVE GATHERING

The Creative Gathering can be seen to be, in many ways, the lynchpin of the entire Arts and Social Change programme. It has served the local arts community in Peterborough as both an anchor and a spur for creative activity and personal development. Beginning in mid-2010, the Creative Gatherings have been held every few months, providing what is effectively an ongoing collaborative space, in which new connections are established amongst a range of people with a stake in the arts in the region. It is also where the idea of the ‘artists network’ has begun to evolve beyond the standard, talking-shop model.

It has served the local arts community in Peterborough as both an anchor and a spur for creative activity and personal development.

The ‘creative gathering’ has, in fact, been around in the arts sector for a decade or so and it refers to a broad grouping of artists who meet to share and support arts practice in non-arts settings like schools. Examples extend from this approach by Creative Partnerships in Kent in 2004 to the current rise in local and regional artists networks such as Creative Gloucester and Creative Wiltshire in the last couple of years. Regionally, there are now all kinds of networks in specific areas of arts practice, such as Connected Culture in London with its focus on participatory arts.

↙ Map showing where the Creative Gatherings took place in Peterborough



The 'gathering' has emerged from a broader trend in community activism that Peter Block, in a paper entitled 'Civic Engagement and the Restoration of Community', defines thus:

> "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."

A chance for people to share practice, to develop work together and ultimately to reach out to more people.

The Creative Gathering, then, is not just talk but a trying out of ideas, a chance for people to share practice, to develop work together and ultimately to reach out to more people. In terms of 'citizen power', it offers people an opportunity to begin as participants and end as facilitators and co-leaders, becoming active 'artist-citizens' in the process.

↖ Creative Gathering 6: Sharing Work Picnic

↙ Creative Gathering 2: Place Making

collective force.' Yet another artist claims that it 'has energised us – it has put us on the map: something is actually happening here!' It seems to have given artists a new voice and perhaps a stronger sense of identification with Peterborough. Alongside these Gatherings, a new and inclusive network called Creative Peterborough has emerged and is growing from strength to strength.

This belief and confidence and growing pride in Peterborough are now to be put to the test. Since drafting this case study, the eighth Creative Gathering has taken place under the leadership of local artist-activist Tom Fox. These final three Gatherings will shape and deliver the Emissary Project, which is all about exchanging practice and representing others in the creative community of Peterborough. This more outward initiative, which is hoped will lead to new creative relationships with artists and organisations beyond the city, is the subject of another study. Its outcomes will help us to see just how powerful Peterborough's conversations have been.

↖ Creative Gathering 4: Designing Applied Practice

↙ Creative Gathering 7: Artists in Residence

CREATING THE GATHERING

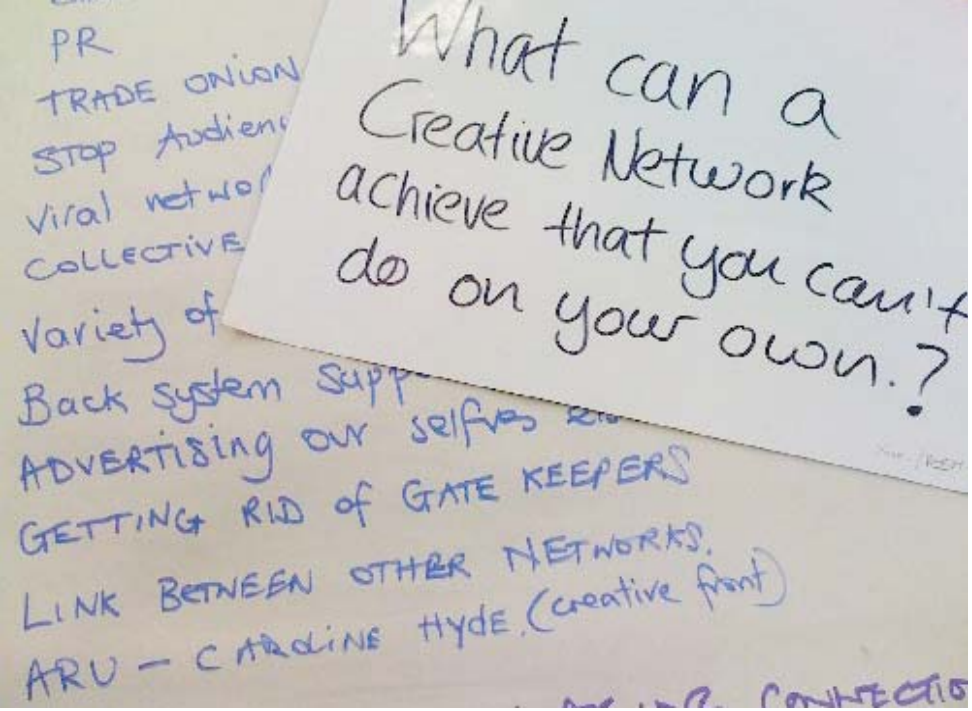
> “We already have the conditions for change. What we need are motivated people who want that change and have some of the skills to make it happen. We are getting there.”

Sophie Antonelli, co-founder of The Green Backyard

By the end of 2011, there had been seven Creative Gatherings, each held in a different venue around the city and all curated in a different way. All have been open to anyone working in the arts in Peterborough, whether on a professional or a voluntary basis. The short-term aim linking the series is simply to provide a space where people can meet, debate, share knowledge and expertise, learn and practise. The long-term agenda is to shape and support a more connected and cohesive arts community, strong enough to sustain itself beyond the life of Citizen Power and which can contribute to a stronger arts offer for the city.

This larger purpose is spelled out in Bigger Thinking for Smaller Cities, a report from Regional Cities East that highlights the need for local arts leaders to act also as civic leaders, ‘collaborating with local authorities to shape local priorities, advocating for the value and contribution of arts and culture to future well-being and prosperity and driving increased philanthropy locally’. This benefits local artists, who can lever in further funding on the basis of their contribution to social outcomes, local residents, who can feel pride in a place that does things differently and creatively, and the local authority itself, which can point to being a city of innovation.

To encourage the necessary autonomy and initiative amongst the local arts community – and, coincidentally, to spread the organisational burden more fairly – each Creative Gathering has been co-facilitated by different artists and companies under the overall guidance of the MAP Consortium, led by Chris Higgins and Fiona Lesley. This co-facilitation, typically between artists



from different disciplines who might not have met before but who have been brought together to work together on a given theme, models the particularly open kind of relationship and networking that the Arts and Social Change programme is keen to promote.

The other important stimulus has been the enforced change of venue each time, on the rolling-stone-and-moss principle. 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 contexts. It also has the eminently practical and useful outcome of establishing a wider diversity of venues in the city that may now be more interested in supporting the arts community and that, in several cases, have benefited from the exposure.

↑ **Above:** Creative Gathering 5: Open Space Technology

FOR US AND BY US

There have been tangible outcomes from the Creative Gatherings. They have acted as a guide and sharing mechanism for projects such as Experiments in Place Making and Dialogue in Action. Some of the organisations that have provided the strategically selected venues for each gathering have opened up further opportunities for engagement. For example, City College offered a free monthly classroom-cum-studio space for local artists after the Creative Gathering was held there in February 2011. Local artists have received professional development support – in one case, the two artists who led the fifth Creative Gathering had been funded to attend a three-day event in London on Open Space techniques, which they then used to facilitate the session.

An inclusive and interactive local arts community is fundamental to a thriving arts ecology but there is more to the Creative Gathering than an artists' network.

The less tangible benefits are no less significant. An inclusive and interactive local arts community is fundamental to a thriving arts ecology but there is more to the Creative Gathering than an artists' network. Apart from the boost these sessions have given artists in terms of confidence, knowledge and fellowship, a more adventurous and creative attitude seems to have emerged about collaboration.

The artists have responded enthusiastically. For one, the Creative Gathering is 'for us, by us', quite unlike a conference situation, where the only contribution is to ask questions after the speeches. As another artist puts it, 'We now understand the power of coming together – we can become more of a

one making contemporary dance moves, the other vogueing but both participating in the same creative moment.

No hard and fast conclusions are drawn at the end of this evening. What has happened is that everyone is now thinking perhaps more than they had before about the peculiar dynamic of local artists working with local residents and where creativity sits in that relationship. It is a topic that has emerged, like those in earlier gatherings, from people in Peterborough, expressing their needs and concerns, rather than having been predetermined elsewhere.

↙ Creative Gathering 7: Artists in Residence

GATHERING THE CREATIVES

> “I encountered a great, warm, fabulous and creative group of people on Monday evening. For weeks I had sat at the cathedral, scratching my head, wondering where all the culture was and whom we could approach to work together on events and exhibitions – and then Monday came.”

Sarah McGhie, Development Manager, Peterborough Cathedral

There has been a deliberate attempt over the last two years to widen participation in the gatherings, targeting individuals and groups who have not engaged previously and trying to ensure it is not always the ‘usual suspects’ that turn up and contribute. When people arrive, they have found a welcoming environment, with good food laid on, where they are encouraged to take part and say what they really think. Again, this is deliberate policy, part of the hospitality of the ‘gathering’ as opposed to the meeting.

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

Within the first three Creative Gatherings, an average of 50 people were attending; even more came to the sixth, a picnic held with community activists, artists, business people and participants from the other Citizen Power programmes. On each occasion, new people have appeared. Despite the advent of social media, it is still difficult for many to find out what is going on elsewhere in Peterborough. It seems that many coming to the gathering feel that there is a wealth of art happening in the city but that it tends to go on ‘underground’, invisibly. One artist commented: ‘Whenever I come to one of these gatherings, I always find something or someone I didn’t know existed.’

Another said, ‘I think I do miss a lot of what is going on. Having arrived knowing no one, I now realise that there is a wide base of artists practising in all sorts of different ways across our city.’

Bringing people together alleviates their isolation but it has the potential to do more. Recent psychological experiments have demonstrated that exposing people to unfamiliar perspectives fosters creativity. It seems that groups that are too familiar with each other are less creative and productive than those that welcome strangers with differing views to offer. Thus, through participating in the gatherings, people from different disciplines have been finding ways to collaborate – for example, in the project described in another case study, Experiments in Place Making. The creativity has come out of the challenge of meeting others and discovering a different perspective on a common goal of making art – one artist said that the experience had ‘encouraged me to aim higher’.

…I now realise that there is a wide base of artists practising in all sorts of different ways across our city.

The Creative Gathering is, then, not simply a ‘gathering of creatives’. It offers more than the chance for artists and arts workers to meet new people and network in the conventional swapping-cards-and-email-addresses manner. Certainly, each session has included some guidance on professional development opportunities and each has ended with an information ‘bulletin’, where upcoming shows and exhibitions are promoted, but neither of these activities defines the core purpose of the Creative Gathering which is – simply – to be collectively creative.

GATHERING CREATIVITY

> “We want to create a ‘scratch’ exhibition. Everyone – artist or not – is invited to come ready to make and exhibit a brief creative ‘statement’. This can be a one or a combination of a short piece of text, an image or photograph, a brief piece of music or performance, a poem, an object. You may want to prepare something and bring it with you, or upload an image, a piece of writing, an audio clip or a short film to our Creative Gathering webpage beforehand but it’s also fine to arrive on the night and to be spontaneous…”

From an invitation to a Creative Gathering

Each gathering has had a creative element – the fourth, for example, featured an interactive installation created by the Blok Collective. The seventh event explored the interrelated ideas of ‘artist’ and ‘resident’ via acts of direct, creative exploration rather than through a conventional debate. Everyone was invited to consider three headings and three critical questions:

Artists IN residence	What kind of attachment or role is possible?
Artists AS residents	How do we act and how are we perceived?
Artists AND residents	What work and interactions are occurring?

Over the course of the evening, facilitated by musician Lee Ashton from Beat This and visual artist René Viner, participants worked on pieces to share in the final performance or exhibition, either by themselves or working in small groups negotiating a collective response. In one striking case, two young men improvised dances in response to the recordings of other people’s voices – poems and texts created moments before –