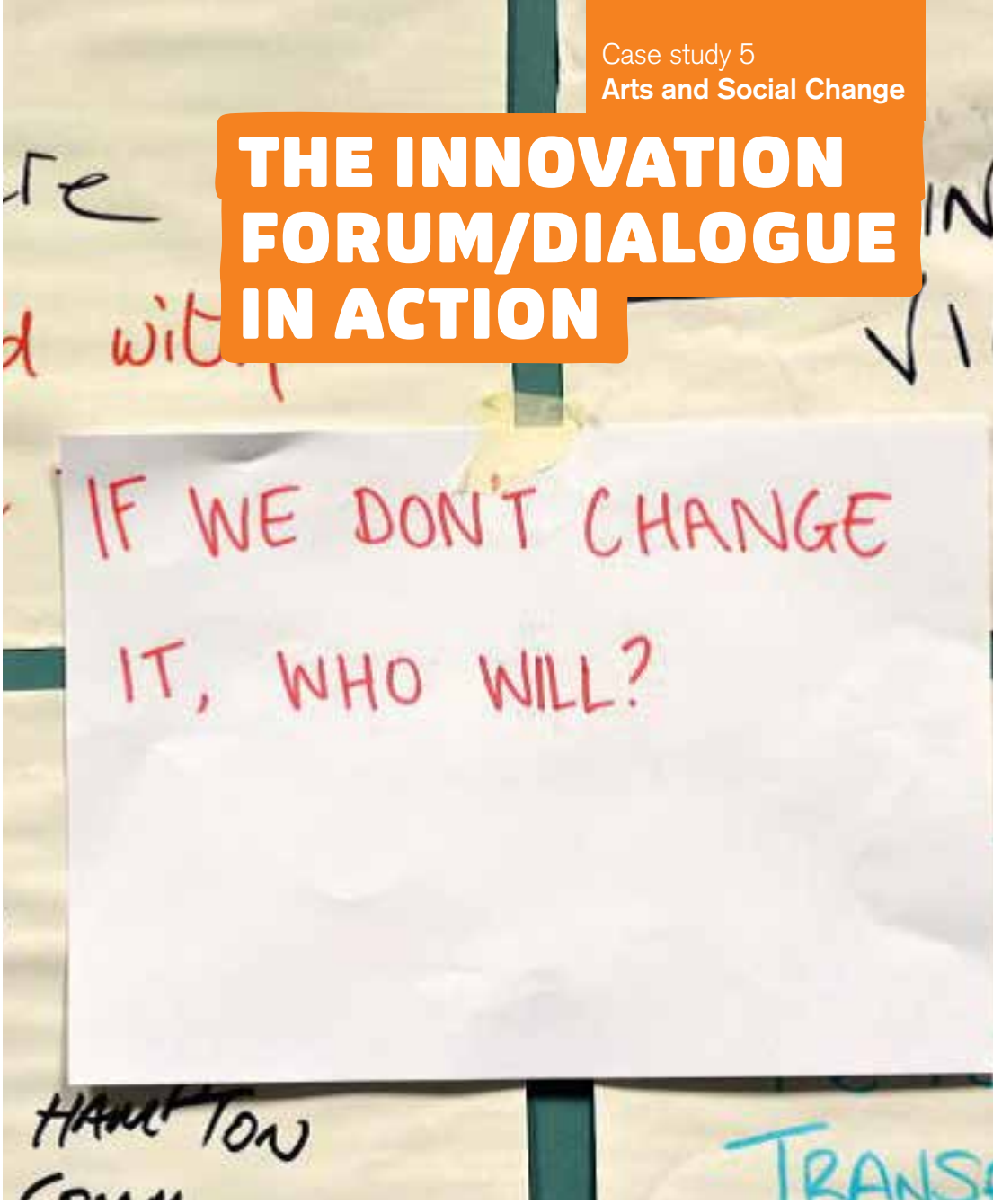
Case study 5
Arts and Social Change

THE INNOVATION FORUM/DIALOGUE IN ACTION



RSA Action and Research Centre

ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

PETERBOROUGH CITY COUNCIL

CITIZEN POWER PETERBOROUGH

This case study is the fifth and final in a series of case studies that 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 uncovers some of the inherent challenges we encountered, in the hope that these may prove useful for similar initiatives.

THE AUTHOR: RICHARD INGS

As an independent writer, researcher and arts consultant over the last twenty-five years, Richard Ings has worked with numerous cultural organisations, from Arts Council England and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation to the National Youth Theatre and Glyndebourne Productions. A selection of his publications may be read and downloaded at www.richardings.posterous.com

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 5
THE INNOVATION FORUM/DIALOGUE IN ACTION

At a time of economic disarray, when even enlightened local authorities are having to consider cutting their arts and libraries budgets, to claim that artists can have a significant role in improving services and in helping local authorities to engage and motivate the citizenry is a bold and radical argument to make.

…it was through different forms of expression and communication – from dance to photography.

It requires jettisoning the notion that the arts is something that always sits outside mainstream social and political activity – a product that you simply go and see or read or listen to – and accepting that, stripped of its rarefied aura, the 'arts' is simply another word for the common creative impulse to express and communicate ways of being and acting in the world. And it was through different forms of expression and communication – from dance to photography – that the city of Peterborough's major stakeholders found new ways to relate to and work with each other and from that engagement to begin to provide better services for the people living there.

> "With all the challenges of a city like Peterborough, we decided that doing the same old things in the same old way wouldn't get us very far."
>
> Gillian Beasley, Chief Executive of Peterborough City Council

In 2011 Peterborough's local strategic partnership, the Greater Peterborough Partnership, launched an ambitious ten year transformation agenda with a set of underlying principles requiring a substantial shift of culture in citywide service delivery: the Single Delivery Plan. After some debate about how best to achieve this shift, the strategic partnership grappled with how to move away from traditional meetings in council buildings to an approach that breaks the mould and transforms the way all partners work together.

Their question was: how could they engage people of influence in the city to work together to produce a strategy that would work well on the ground.

At this point it seemed logical to the strategic partnership to turn to the RSA, with whom the city council had been working over the last two years on the Citizen Power programme. Their question was: how could they engage people of influence in the city to work together to produce a strategy that would work well on the ground and not just on paper? How should they set about fostering a new and shared citywide leadership ethos where new productive relationships and innovative working practices could flourish? To help answer these questions, the Citizen Power team of Jocelyn Cunningham and Sam McLean brought in the MAP Consortium, which had been running the programme's successful Creative Gatherings.

The subsequent establishment of an 'Innovation Forum' can be seen as a realisation of 'citizen power' – a genuine attempt to listen to what the people of Peterborough would actually like rather then to carry on prescribing services for them in the traditional way. The programme of activity that underpinned and validated the Forum's claim of innovation drew on one particular strand of the Citizen Power programme: 'Arts and Social Change'. Headed up by Jocelyn Cunningham from the RSA, Arts and Social Change had already achieved a range of positive

↖ Forum 5; the lit chair represented a city wide challenge. Participants positioned themselves in relation to the chair, depending on how relevant they felt this was to their work, with surprising outcomes

outcomes using creative practice to build rich new relationships between agencies and individuals across the city (see the other case studies for examples). The Innovation Forum was, thus, in many ways the culmination and global realisation of all those discrete activities. All the partners were, in effect, offering the opportunity to put creative practice at the heart of the public, private and voluntary sector's machines.

But precisely how could creative practice or artistic intervention help to forge improved cross-sector partnerships or build a stronger culture of shared leadership in the city – both essential to the creation of an effective Single Delivery Plan?

UNLOCKING CHANGE

> "The Innovation Forum programme was anchored by creative practice… a mechanism for unlocking change. Creative practice draws on the thinking, processes and structures of the arts (such as theatre, visual art and curatorial practice) as channels and catalysts for defining new ways of working. In this context it involved a range of techniques, exercises and structures which were designed and carefully facilitated in order to give participants a distinct experience of themselves, each other, and their work."

Jocelyn Cunningham & Chris Higgins, Leading a City Differently: the Arts, Partnership and Public Services

The initial invitation to join the Innovation Forum was accepted by over 50 community leaders from various sectors and agencies, around 70 per cent of whom remained as the 'hard core' of a constantly evolving and inclusive group. There were elected council members alongside officers from various city departments, including planning and finance as well as adult social care and neighbourhood development. There were senior leaders from the fire service and the police. Hospitals and the then PCT were represented, along with public health. The City College and the Regional College were there, along with a range of voluntary agencies – including Mind, ageUK and managers from enterprise and private sector business, such as Opportunity Peterborough, Serco and Thomas Cook. The city's two Trusts – Vivacity, the cultural and leisure charitable trust and PECT, the environment city trust – were also represented. This was then a potential Babel of different policy agendas and working practices and, yes, languages, too – the clashing jargon of professionals from different worlds who had hardly ever had the chance to meet like this.

Its members defined the methodology and the ultimate aim of the Forum as 'Being together differently to do together differently'. The point of this was that, if they were really to reconfigure service delivery, they would need to change their relationships both with their peers in other organisations as well as with their colleagues at their own place of work. There were four main aspects to this process of being and doing together differently.

First was to leave behind the 'business as usual' culture as far as possible in order to think afresh about how they and their organisations might behave in a way that would improve things. Second was to 'experience difference' – in other words, to experience in a safe environment what working differently actually feels like. Third was to 'reconfigure relationships' – to prioritise citywide outcomes over one's own agenda. Fourth was to 'access the full potential of the leadership' in the city, not just those qualities evident in the ordinary course of business. This was, then, a highly ambitious programme both for the Citizen Power and MAP team to create and deliver and for leaders to commit to.

Second was to 'experience difference' – in other words, to experience in a safe environment what working differently actually feels like.

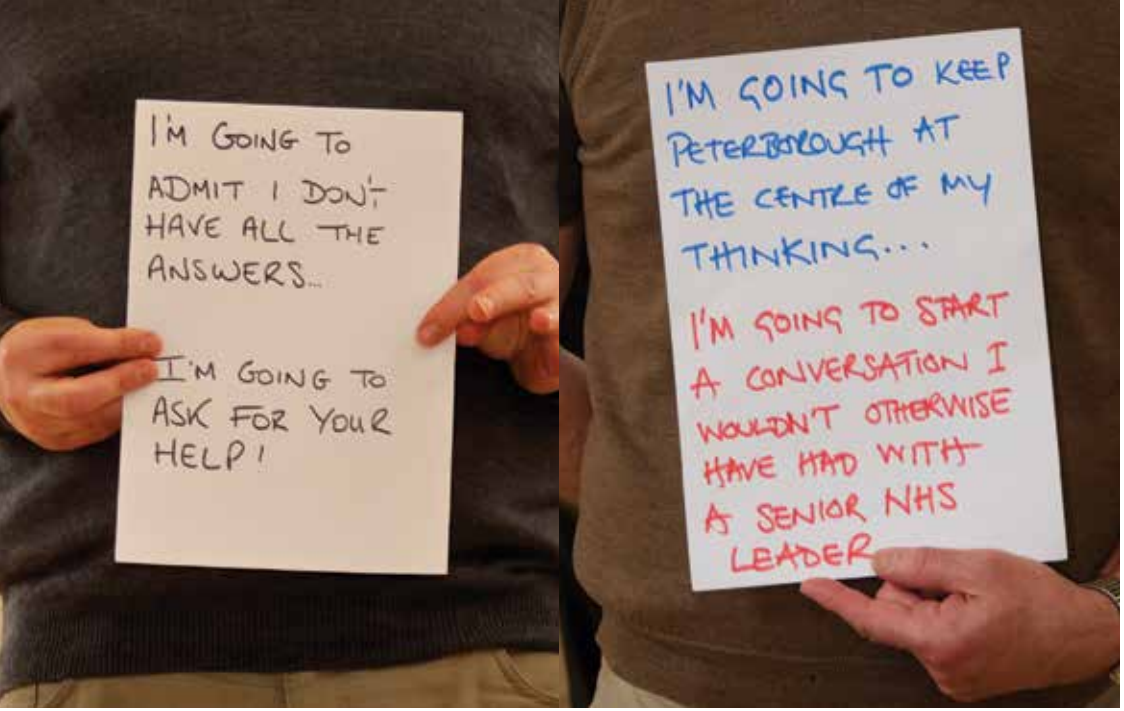
Fundamental to its ultimate success was the programme's use of techniques and approaches drawn from creative practice. One of the first things that participants had to grasp was to learn to seek answers but not to force conclusions and to be patient, as new solutions are by definition unknown and may be discovered in unexpected ways or places. Linked to this was the idea of 'enquiry', using questions and question-making to reframe the underlying issues and dynamics of particular issues. That approach was facilitated throughout the year by working with images, metaphor, place, and performance, showing participants how active and indirect ways of sharing perspectives and interpreting ideas opened up new opportunities and often produced unexpected results. In the course of participating in these temporary and often artificial structures for dialogue, new voices and perspectives were heard and appreciated in new ways, making collaboration and trust that much more possible in future.

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED AT THE FORUM

The programme offered participants several professional development opportunities. First, there were six full Forum meetings – eight days of activity – held at two-monthly intervals. Each meeting was held in different, sometimes unfamiliar place – the city museum, a community centre – as part of a general attempt to reacquaint participants with the city, its people and its assets.

The first Forum (entitled 'Conditions for Change and Innovation') was a memorable one for many of the participants as it included a movement workshop where they had to devise a dance piece and perform it to each other. As Chris Higgins explained, this was 'a marker of how different we were prepared to be'. For most, dance of this kind was an unfamiliar experience, exploring a different kind of intelligence and illustrating very clearly the nature of risk-taking. It was important not just in breaking the ice but in heading off from the start the kind of assumption about the nature of this programme that one participant voiced on the first day: 'Should we bring our own spreadsheets or will you be providing them?' Guest speakers were also invited to stimulate discussion and ideas on the themes. On this occasion, Hilary Cottam, co-founder of Participle kick-started a discussion on innovation in social care.

Equally unexpected was the task of the second Forum: taking a packed lunch on a citywide tour of 'hot spots' and 'cold spots' – places in need of attention. Members were invited to collect objects they found en route and then label them. This curation exercise was aimed at developing visions of the city beyond those already laid out on paper. It was extended to developing a question (If we don't change it, who will?), a mantra (We have the will, the power and the ability) and an instruction (Take small, brave steps). Franco Bianchini, Professor of Cultural Planning



↖ Each participant identified a particular personal commitment to working in a different way

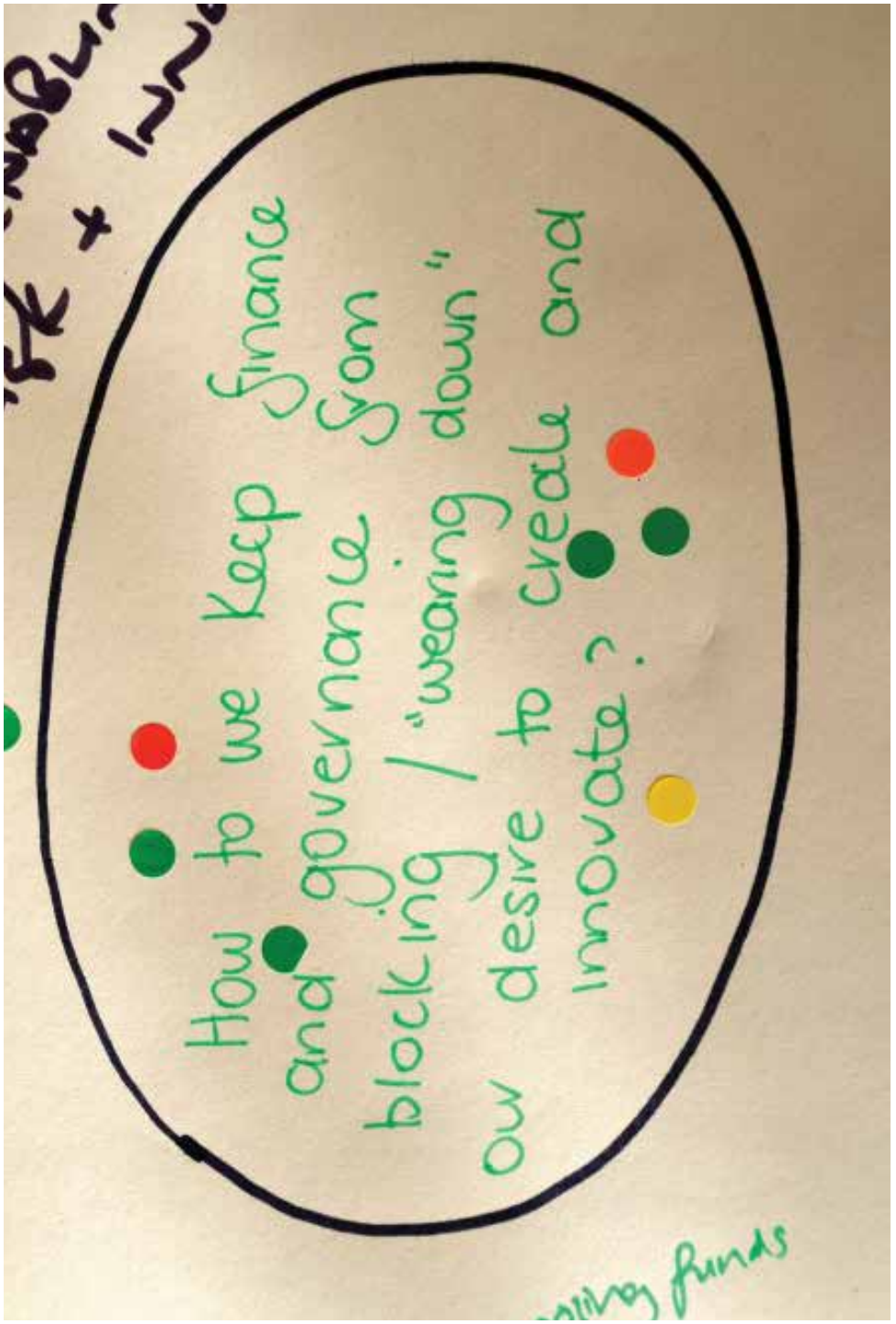
and Policy from Leeds Metropolitan University, talked with members on the session's theme, 'Perceptions of Place'.

The next Forum took the vision thing a step further, working with innovation techniques based around the stimulus of image and metaphor as a route to generating new perspectives and ideas. The fourth Forum took them out again, this time to the city museum, which a surprising number of participants had not visited before. Here they were asked to consider what they experienced in the museum and how this might be applied to their own place of work. They saw photographs taken by Chris Porz and exhibited here, pairing portraits of Peterborough citizens he had taken recently and thirty years previously. They tried out artist Gillian Wearing's idea of wearing 'signs' – statements, in this case, of what each felt were blocks to making progress. The honesty of their response startled Chris Higgins, who feels that this marked a turning point in the programme. One sign read 'Let me in'; another 'Excluded from the current debates'.

The fifth Forum focused on performance and the roles of actor and director; aptly enough, Forum members took on some of the facilitation of this session. The sixth in the series explored storytelling. As before, members were encouraged to reflect on what they were experiencing and how it might apply to their own working life and the way they interacted with each other. Although all the activity over these meetings was group-based and interactive, Chris believes that its key impact was on individual thinking.

> The learning was individually embodied. Although there was a lot of collective experience, people took it in a personal way. And it affected how they approached their own work.

To embed what they had discovered in the Fora in their everyday working life, members then tried things out in smaller 'learning groups', facilitated by further members of the RSA and Map team joined by highly experienced Peterborough-based creative practitioners. This ranged from simple things like visiting each other at work, which would often unlock new thinking, to undertaking short experiments to test out these ideas. One group made a film about Nene Park, exploring perceptions about this rich but under-appreciated resource for the city: this prompted the park's chief executive to reframe his plans for a major capital project there. Another group developed a 'challenge toolkit' to help people deal with blocking behaviour within local organisations. By engaging in purposeful activity of this kind, Forum members moved beyond just talking.



↙ A question identified in Forum 1 that resonated with many participants

DIALOGUE IN ACTION

This engagement in real issues in the city deepened halfway through the year when the RSA introduced 'Dialogue in Action', which formalised the notion of the creative associate as a prompt or provocateur for new thinking. Not all of the five people who worked in this way for Dialogue in Action were professional artists. Diane Goldsmith, who led on the programme, has a dance and education background and Stuart Payn is a visual artist but Sophia Antonelli runs the Green Backyard, an environmental project, Andy Coles is a retired civil servant and now a writer, and photographer Chris Porz works primarily in the NHS. Diane articulated their key role:

> to support, inspire, challenge and make links to creative practice, acting as a catalyst for individuals or groups within the Innovation Forum. It is as much about creative thinking, questioning and skills as co-delivering experiments and projects. It is also about building capacity and enabling collaboration.

They asked questions but did not provide answers; they started conversations and then listened. Although they had their different disciplines to fall back on, that was not as important as their skill as eliciting new thinking and new behaviour from the groups they were working with.

This core idea of the creative associate acting as a catalyst for new ways of working – as grit in the oyster

This core idea of the creative associate acting as a catalyst for new ways of working – as grit in the oyster – led ultimately to a structure where those who were interested in this role in Peterborough learned how to do it. This ensured that local people could ultimately sustain the programme; it also opened up

new opportunities for those trained as creative associates – for example, Diane Goldsmith herself has been approached to take on this kind of role for the fire service.

Dialogue in Action embraced four projects involving over a dozen different organisations. Forum members volunteered to put themselves onto this programme, which gave them an unusual opportunity to address a major issue facing the city in greater detail. The Arts and Social Change strand responded by funding the creative associates and their work.

'Falls' brought public health, voluntary services and adult education together to address the challenge of reducing risks of falls in the home. 'Engaging school leaders in the Peterborough Learning Partnership' was led by a head teacher involved in the Peterborough Curriculum strand of Citizen Power who worked with a creative practitioner to create a space and an opportunity for other school leaders to explore reciprocal partnerships. The 'Neighbourhood Project', aimed at greater civic engagement and community cohesion, was run by a local councillor in partnership with neighbourhood team leaders. Finally, the 'Sharing Success' project brought together the Principal of the Community College, the General Secretary of the Voluntary Services and leaders within the local NHS Executive to examine what has worked in providing adult social services, to think about why and to find ways of recording those reasons. Each project had a creative associate attached and sometimes, as in the Neighbourhood Project, a creative initiative emerged that engaged with local artists.

In describing the outcome of the first of these projects, David Bache, Chief Executive of AgeUK Peterborough, summed up what all four achieved to some extent or other:

> A multi-agency approach was used to successfully bid for funds that have enabled measures to be put in place very quickly to try and reduce the number of older people becoming ill or dying from the extreme cold this winter. None of us could have achieved this result working in isolation. This is another example of how working in collaboration can help to generate adequate funding and implement solutions quickly and effectively.

WHAT DIFFERENCE DID ALL THIS MAKE?

> "I enjoy the fact that we can now be so open with each other in terms of current issues, and how we challenge each other to do more, do differently – or just see the positives in times of difficulty. It's already changed the way I approach and package some of my projects, and how I see the wider city leadership role we all have."

James McCulloch, Chief Executive of Nene Park Trust

To illustrate what difference the Innovation Forum has made, many of the forum members cite a range of changes, beginning with simple administrative matters – for example, a question about the presentation of board papers that would have involved a lengthy exchange of emails and perhaps even a meeting was resolved with a quick phone call. There is, it seems from talking to the forum members, a new willingness amongst people who had hitherto rarely strayed from the security zone of their own office and their own policies to take risks not just in terms of reaching out to colleagues elsewhere but also in loosening their dependence on the formal routine of the meeting, with its comfortable, iterative framework of agenda items dutifully gone through and minuted, sometimes without having engaged the very people it was most relevant to. As Sean Hanson, the Partnership Director of the Peterborough Serco Strategic Partnership, characterised it:

> The purpose of the meeting is to get to the end of the meeting. You don't listen to whether there is actual agreement around the agenda – there's a two-dimensional response: are you with us or not? Ok, then, let's move on…

Richard Astle, Director of the Greater Peterborough Partnership, confesses that he and his colleagues had thought more about output and outcome measures than people's actual needs:

> We had an agenda based on documents and numbers but we didn't invest any time in talking to people – we assumed that assessing our agreed joint targets was all that was needed. We now know that we need to make people part of the team. Taking part in the Forum could be uncomfortable at times – very uncomfortable – but barriers were broken and relationships changed for the better. The fact that we are renewing the Forum for another year is a measure of our progress.

Gillian gave an example of another kind of change with far-reaching consequences: the city's disability forum had long been viewed by the council – benignly enough – as an outside pressure group until Gillian ended up in the same Forum learning group with its representative, Brian Taylor. Brian is now frequently in the building, advising on all kinds of disability-related matters – including clearing an area for disabled people to attend the council meetings there. One experiment Gillian took part in, trying – with some difficulty – to get from Peterborough railway station to city hall in a wheelchair, convinced her that people unable to walk know better than anyone else what they might need in terms of access. This was all part of a wider realisation:

> Just to say to a community: 'Here's a range of services on offer' is not the right approach. We don't actually know what people need. We don't have the answers. One Forum session we did only allowed us to ask questions of each other – the first questions were, in retrospect, quite naïve. The more questions you ask, the deeper you go. I have learned not to go with that first question but to try and find out what it is really like to stand in someone else's shoes.
>
> In looking at what older people might need, for example, rather than simply announce what kinds of home help might be available, the council should ask more questions and consult older people themselves before commissioning services. It might then discover that what older people want more than home help is help in getting out and having a stimulating life outside the home.

↖ One of the object our panellists selected as a metaphor to describe the process of change

MELTING THE ICE

Gillian Beasley and other leaders from across the public, private and voluntary sector spoke at a seminar held to share the Peterborough experience at the RSA in February this year. All testified to the impact of the Forum on their ability to develop new kinds of relationships with colleagues in other agencies and other sectors: relationships based on trust. That new sense of trust had come, they said, from sharing in the creative group process – as Gillian told me later:

> It has made us properly understand what other organisations – healthcare, the police and so on – are actually doing. That means the lack of alignment that

sometimes caused inter-agency difficulties has now largely gone. If there is a problem, we just say: Let's find out what it is – and it gets sorted.

In a reiteration of the 'object as metaphor' technique used so often in Forum gatherings over the last year, speakers at the RSA seminar were asked to describe the process they had been though via an object or image of their own choosing. Gillian's

…speakers at the RSA seminar were asked to describe the process they had been though via an object or image of their own choosing.

was one of those joke plastic ice-cubes with a fly trapped in it. It made her think, she said, of how she and her colleagues and perhaps the city itself had been stuck, dormant, as if frozen in ice and then of how, given the right temperature, real ice melts – and things can then start moving.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With special thanks to all the participants of the Innovation Forum programme in Peterborough and in particular, those that contributed to the RSA event, 'Leading a City Differently' in February 2013:

Gillian Beasley, Chief Executive, Peterborough City Council

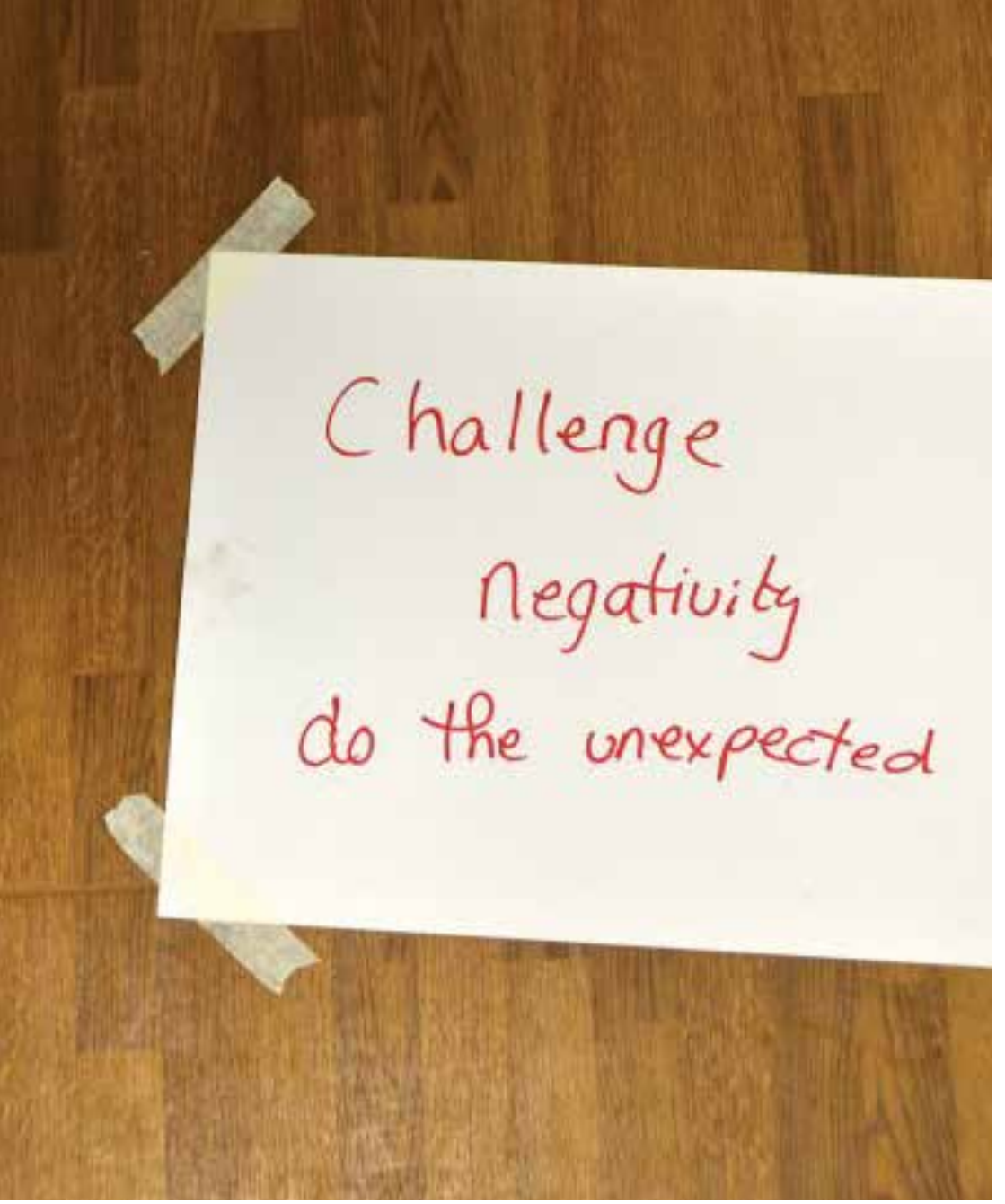
Richard Astle, Director, Greater Peterborough Partnership

Sean Hanson, Partnership Director, Peterborough Serco Strategic Partnership

Claire Rintoul, Chief Executive, Peterborough and Fenland Mind

James McCulloch, Chief Executive, Nene Park Trust

The co-directors of The Map Consortium, Chris Higgins, and Fiona Lesley and associate Martin Gent led on the design and delivery of the Innovation Forum with support from Subhadassi, Diane Goldsmith and Kate Hall alongside the RSA team of Jocelyn Cunningham, Sam McLean and Georgina Chatfield.



↑ Participants created pledges that could generate culture change in each of their working environments

↗ Participants in the Innovation Forum created this prompt as a reminder for why they were doing this work