

Case study 4  
Arts and Social Change

# THE EMISSARY PROJECT



This case study is the fourth 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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# **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 4 THE EMISSARY PROJECT

“On a sunny day I sit in the garden and look over the hedge as the sun lowers behind it. Sometimes, in a place like Peterborough, there can be a feeling that everything else is over there. For me, the Emissary Project was a personal journey over the hedge and out – to find new practitioners for an exciting exchange. Exchange is the key... not just us going out and learning but going out and bringing the local arts ethos along with us.”

Tom Fox, artist and convenor of Peterborough's Creative Gatherings

The Emissary Project was about exchange and representation: exchanging practice and representing the creative community of Peterborough to others. It seemed the logical next step in the Arts and Social Change strand of Citizen Power, which had – largely through the device of the Creative Gatherings – begun to explore the strategic importance of collaboration and collective decision-making amongst local artists and other creative practitioners. Exchanges of experience, of skills and of knowledge had already become common practice at the gatherings.

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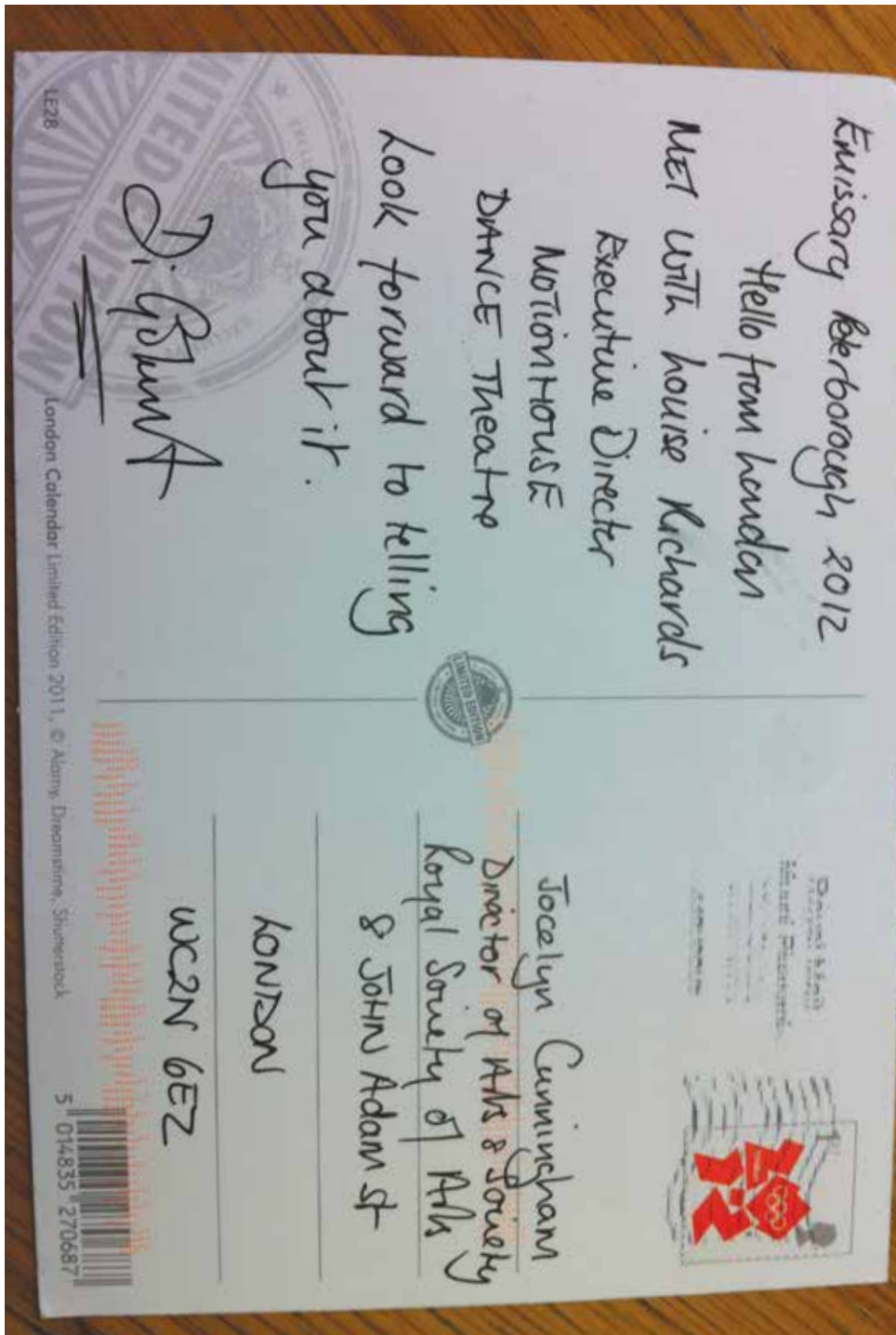
An individual might benefit personally or professionally from these exchanges but they fed, too, into a growing sense of being part of a community rooted in a particular place. They were Peterborough conversations, not just artists networking. It made sense now, two years down the line, to expand those exchanges and those conversations by engaging with practitioners outside the city. The core idea of the project, then, was encapsulated in the role of 'emissary' – defined, according to the dictionary, as an ambassador, a messenger, an agent sent on a mission to represent or advance the interests of another. Chris Higgins of the MAP Consortium, who helped to formulate the project, confirms that it was this

idea that differentiated it from the 'go and see' schemes that are occasionally run for artists:

“The idea of the Creative Gathering as a collective body was important, so they wouldn't be going out purely as individuals. There could be a personal angle, of course, but the idea was that you were carrying a number of questions from the community, pursuing lines of enquiry on everyone's behalf. 'Go and see' schemes are usually about targeted professional development for individuals. Here, those going out to other cities to learn from their experience and expertise were also ambassadors for the great work going on in Peterborough, the energy evident in the Creative Gatherings. Things had reached a point here where outside influence could be seen as a treat not a threat. People were looking for and absorbing outside practice – outside the city, that is – as a kind of nourishment rather than feeling crowded out and undermined. The Emissary concept evolved to echo that.”

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- Each Emissary sent a postcard as a commitment to share their experiences



## DEVELOPING THE PROJECT

Artists were invited to put forward ideas and enquiries of interest to an advisory team composed of Tom Fox, the local artist who was about to take over running the Creative Gatherings; Jocelyn Cunningham from Arts and Society at the RSA; Greer Roberts, from Vivacity, Peterborough's cultural and leisure charitable trust, and Belinda Bryan of Arts Council England. Jocelyn describes the process:

“This project was a slow burn. It took people a while to understand what it was and to decide what they wanted from it. The names of who wanted to visit whom went to partners at Vivacity and Arts Council England but for further ideas. There were numerous meetings at the Brewery Tap (the ‘artists’ pub’) to unpick what each artist felt they wanted to learn and how far this would be useful to others in the Peterborough creative community. It was a self-selection process: some dropped out when they realised that it wasn’t about setting up a professional development opportunity but a question of representing others and considering what the larger community might want to find out through their visit. We wanted to know that each visit would have resonance and use for many more than those who actually took part.”

As the Emissary Project took shape, another significant issue emerged. This was the notion of legacy. At its simplest, this was about how the project itself might seed its own legacy and, by extension, help to continue some aspects of the Arts and Social Change strand in Peterborough, which was due to come to an end over the next few months. Although Chris Higgins and Jocelyn Cunningham had come up with the basic concept of the Emissary Project, they were keen that it should be developed and shaped and then delivered by local people, as Chris recounts:

“Arts and Social Change has always been very aware that local people don’t want projects flown in or to be told how to do things. From the kick-off, we wanted to move quickly to co-facilitation and support Peterborough artists doing it for themselves.”

This was one aspect of legacy. Another that became clear as discussions developed was that Peterborough had to develop better ways of sustaining

the kind of ambitious arts initiatives that had flared in the city and then flickered out for want of a coherent cultural strategy and framework to support them. This was a challenge that Arts and Social Change and key partners at Vivacity and Arts Council England East were committed to tackling, not least by encouraging local artists to take the lead on asking the right questions.

✦ An Emissary gathering after the visits were completed.  
From left to right: Shelagh Smith, Garth Bayley,  
Diane Goldsmith, Helen Mould, Tom Fox.



## THE EMISSARIES

By the time of the ninth Creative Gathering, in June 2012, people were clear about the two questions they needed to settle: *Whom do we think we, as a diverse group of practitioners, should be visiting?* And: *How do we wish to represent ourselves as a creative city and body of practitioners?* That meeting agreed what the five emissaries from Peterborough would enquire into and whom they were to visit. It was then down to Jocelyn Cunningham and her colleagues to broker the visits and find artists or organisations that could best address the questions the emissary wanted to explore.

### 1/ Garth Bayley

*Incubation spaces in multi art forms*

Hosting visit: Judith Knight/Mark Godber: Arts Admin

### 2/ Diane Goldsmith

*Site specific and community based dance*

Hosting visit: Louise Richards: Motionhouse

### 3/ Tomasz Grotkowski

*Establishing an Eastern European gallery*

Hosting visit: Hungry Arts Scottish/Russian Gallery in Edinburgh  
Gallery in Cambridge (brokered by Shelagh Smith)

### 4/ Kate Hall

*Building local theatre company while acting as development body for local arts community; collaborating and bridging*

Hosting visit: LIFT – Erika Campayne

### 5/ Shelagh Smith

*Developing national contacts and support for integrated arts ambition and manifesto; new ideas*

Hosting visit: Virginia Tandy – former Director of Culture,  
Manchester City Council

As well as organising the trips and covering travel and accommodation costs, the RSA brokered the introductions on behalf of and in consultation with the visiting artist. For their part, the emissaries prepared a series of questions to structure their conversations, round-robinning other local artists to see what they would like to find out and adding those enquiries to the list.



In the short informal reports from emissaries that follow, we look at three of these enquiries, focusing on three key aspects of developing and sustaining creative and cultural life in Peterborough.

Naturally enough, as chair of Vivacity, an independent charity that has a contract with Peterborough City Council to operate its arts, heritage, sport, leisure and library portfolio, Shelagh Smith was concerned most with the big picture: how might Peterborough develop a cultural strategy that the city – its council, its philanthropists, its artists and its people – would buy into for the long haul? Virginia Tandy, she hoped, would have some answers from her time as head of arts in Manchester, when she oversaw the successful implementation of that city's cultural strategy.

As a dance teacher with a history of performance and dance management behind her, Diane Goldsmith's enquiry was artform-focused but her concern had much wider ramifications, particularly about how to create the conditions for sustainable arts projects. Aptly enough, her chosen exchange partner was Louise Richards, Executive Director of Motionhouse, a dance company that had carried out an ambitious project in Peterborough several years earlier that had failed to spark a lasting legacy there because the city had had no strategic framework to support it.

Finally, as an emerging visual artist working mainly in oils, Garth Bayley wanted to explore the potential of multidisciplinary collaboration and had been fired up by meeting like-minded practitioners of all kinds at the Creative Gatherings. The RSA put him in touch with Artsadmin, a London-based organisation specialising in performance, site-specific and interdisciplinary work.

## SHELAGH

### The enquiry

Virginia Tandy has done stuff, not just talked about it – she didn't just develop a strategy but she sorted out the nuts and bolts and made it work. There were a number of areas I wanted to explore as an emissary of Peterborough – a city that is consciously exploring its identity and growth strategy. I wanted to learn from her experience how to make an effective contribution to putting culture at the heart of city centre development and regeneration. I boiled it down to six key questions:

- 1 What were the conditions that needed to be in play to make a strategy work?
- 2 How do we create those conditions?
- 3 How do we ensure resilience amongst the partners?
- 4 How do we engage local players?
- 5 What are the funding opportunities?
- 6 How do we build collaboration and openness?

I was aware, of course, that the two cities are very different. Manchester is a huge city with a big population whilst Peterborough is still comparatively small, and their histories are very different. But our city is growing. Although it was designated a 'new town' forty years ago, there has been a century of development here, from the pre-Great War brick industry to the successive waves of immigration – first, Italians, then Pakistanis in the 1960s and most recently East Europeans; 40 languages are spoken here. This cultural mix is one of our strengths.

Of course, historically, the bombing of Manchester city centre in 1996 was the galvanizing event that brought people together to build their city differently. A more relevant factor for Peterborough, however, was that Manchester had enjoyed significant political stability, having had the same political leader and CEO for 15 years. Amongst other things, Virginia had been able to identify a handful of energetic and powerful people, who represented a different stake in the city, another expertise, a different look at the world and they added resilience and robustness to the process.

### The learning points

Local engagement is challenging but essential and we talked about the value of meetings where local people could share ideas and contribute to the discussion and evolution of a cultural strategy for the city. That discussion has led directly to me encouraging and supporting the Deputy Leader of the city council to host a series of four dinners around the theme of Peterborough's heritage. Some 80 people representing a wide range of attractions and organisations – from archaeology to churches to railways to farming – around the whole of Peterborough have attended.

A strategy will be shaped by these conversations, by identifying common strands and actions to be taken as part of a larger plan to improve common perceptions of the city. Everyone now recognises that heritage is not just about conserving old buildings but that those buildings, landscapes and natural phenomena represent and reflect our culture.

## DIANE

### The enquiry

Our conversation took place by the Embankment, with a spectacular panorama of London laid out in front of us. We had been talking about the influence of place on Motionhouse's work and Louise commented, 'There is no best place to inspire, just where you happen to be.' She pointed out that observing the world around us is where it starts. In the present case, it would have included the bench we were sitting on, the proximity of our bodies, the passing of boats and traffic, the mighty power and status of the historical buildings around us and the conversations of foreign tourists passing. All these would form the inspiration for working and drafting ideas.

That was the working method that had led to Voyage, the Cultural Olympiad event in Birmingham, which I had witnessed a few weeks earlier.

“An enormous ship sails into the centre of Victoria Square, Birmingham, docking itself beside the city’s Town Hall. High above the people who gather to look at this marvel, dancers and aerialists appear in the ship’s rigging – the voyage begins. Professional dancers and aerialists join forces with a huge amateur choir, live musicians and more than 140 community performers to transform the Square and tell the story”

Louise described the levels of engagement that emerged throughout the process and production period. Her company worked hard at ground level, recruiting a huge core of young volunteers, partly through a successful twitter feed, which reached a new audience of interest. The company’s extensive continuing professional development programme underpinned project development; interns from The Northern School of Contemporary Dance expanded the company membership to 16 and also established a ‘buddy system’ to enable individual learning support, so that the young dancers were participating alongside and with the same levels of expectation as the professionals.

### **The learning points**

The crucial learning point for me was that this apprentice model developed alongside Voyage recruited only young people who were already on that dance journey. They were contracted and paid a minimal wage for the period March – June 2012. This enabled a professional respect to their role and ensured a commitment to the working role of professional dance. They were treated as Company members and participated in the 360-degree experience of devising, workshops, rehearsals and performance. This raised the bar for them and harnessed potential talent.

There were times when dance was more established in Peterborough – a full-time dance animateur post, a boys’ company and so on – but in the end funding was pulled out and there was no local investment in infrastructure to sustain dance initiatives – including Motionhouse’s Dance Rootz year-long project here in 2000. That project specifically targeted groups of vulnerable young people. I would never start at that point now, of taking funding into areas of social need. I would start with the dance journey. I want to encourage those 16 – 19 year olds in Peterborough who are already on that dance journey to meet together and support each other in the pursuit of professional role models and dance companies to fill in the gaps of their experience. As a direct result of my conversation with Louise, I have successfully applied to Creative Peterborough for funding to create a ‘platform’ for dance dialogue, taking place next March. The journey continues...

## **GARTH**

### **The enquiry**

Artists are choosing to be identified with where they live. I think of myself as a Peterborough artist now but I am still on a learning curve. I have a desire to meet other kinds of artist so that I get to see the bigger picture. For the Emissary Project, I particularly wanted to explore the early incubation stages of creation across art forms. Needing insights on this and advice on how to develop collaborative approaches here in the city, I went to visit Judith Knight and Mark Godber at Artsadmin in East London.

It was a wide-ranging conversation, covering the mechanics of collaborative work. I learned that the ideas should always come first. That you need to choose your potential collaborators very carefully and be aware that working together toward a joint goal is great but there are potential pitfalls to look out for. Although you feed off each other as artists, you also need to be careful not to get lost in project management to the detriment of your own work.

### **The learning points**

I learned that you need to believe in the project and have a long-term vision but that you should only make your work when you are ready to do so. In terms of evaluating the success of your work, you need to consider not just how far the public and press engaged with the piece but whether it could be reproduced and toured.

We went on to discuss the possibilities of this kind of work in Peterborough itself, through open studios, Creative Peterborough and The Still Working pop-up gallery. The realisation that working in a smaller city can often make access to other artists and other disciplines much easier was reassuring. We also looked at cross-artform work across the region, including Live Art Collective East.

One plan now is to look into working with groups in Peterborough that might benefit from creative intervention, such as Peterborough Streets, a local charity for the homeless. This would build on work I am doing with disadvantaged children, producing art with – and learning from – them. Secondly, I am developing a proposal for work exploring the gay café subculture in Whitstable, which Judith liked the idea of and gave me some tips on. I am expecting to learn more about the collaborative process from joining the Whitstable Metropolis DIY, a fairly dynamic group, and working with Richard Layzell, an experienced facilitator of workshops in performance and Live Art on ‘place-making’. I am on my way.

Strategy, sustainability and collaboration: three important ingredients in promoting a healthier cultural life, and wider and more effective use of the city’s artistic and financial resources.

Having exchanged ideas and experience about these issues with practitioners working in other places, the emissaries were thus able to return to Peterborough – to climb back over that hedge – and to share all that they had learned with their peers back home.

## POSTSCRIPT

Those who acted as emissaries for Peterborough's creative communities were asked to choose a picture of an object that would represent, through metaphor, something that they had learned or received from being an emissary. One photographed the tomatoes in her garden, which had flourished despite all the summer rain, because they 'tasted home grown':

“This made me realise that, if you put in sufficient effort at the beginning and give it enough time things will grow into all shapes and sizes but retain that distinct home-grown quality. The Emissary Project has helped me reflect on my own creative journey in Peterborough, which has produced some bumper crops: all those young artists who grew from city roots. It has made me wonder what environment is required to support that growth and make it more visible. How we might harvest a local crop to be proud of and involve everyone in the vision for a citywide strategy for culture.”

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With special thanks to participating Emissaries and those they visited:

Emissary Garth Bayley visiting Judith Knight and Mark Godber from Arts Admin  
[www.artsadmin.co.uk](http://www.artsadmin.co.uk)

Emissary Diane Goldsmith visiting Louise Richards from Motionhouse  
[www.motionhouse.co.uk](http://www.motionhouse.co.uk)

Emissary Kate Hall visiting Erika Campayne from LIFT  
[www.liftfestival.com](http://www.liftfestival.com)

Emissary Shelagh Smith visiting Virginia Tandy – former Director of Culture, Manchester City Council and current Trustee of the National Heritage Lottery Fund  
[www.hlf.org.uk/aboutus/decisionmakers/Trustees/Pages/VirginiaTandyOBE.aspx](http://www.hlf.org.uk/aboutus/decisionmakers/Trustees/Pages/VirginiaTandyOBE.aspx)

And to Tom Fox and Chris Higgins of The Map Consortium for shaping and co-leading on the programme as well as all the artists in Peterborough who participated in early discussions.

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

Citizen Power: [www.thersa.org/action-research-centre/public-services-arts-social-change/citizen-power](http://www.thersa.org/action-research-centre/public-services-arts-social-change/citizen-power)





↑ Diane Goldsmith's bumper crop of tomatoes

↗ The sun over Tom Fox's hedge