

Vocal Conference:

Engaging Communities through the Arts.
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This workshop is about how the work of Arts Development has evolved as a result of our involvement in Planning for Real.

Context - Arts Development Structure

Within NSCentral but across whole City

8 Community Arts officers - geographical and thematic remits, across the 3 Areas, 30 sessional arts tutors, all staff degree qualification in chosen art form, 5 separate budget streams, total budget last year almost £600,000, core budget £270,000.

Earned income from CRF, HLF, Big lottery and small grants/Common Good.

All the grants are used to fund and deliver outreach activity, without the income the activities would not happen. All outreach is free to participants.

Whitespace is the focus for citywide arts development events and supports the infrastructure required to deliver outreach capacity. with 37,000 participants taking part in 1,580 events last year. Recent press has profiled work in publications ranging from Aberdeen Press and Journal, Secondary Education magazine, TES, and the Times. Heritage Lottery Fund and the Scottish Museums Council use projects such as 'Young Muslim Aberdeen' and 'Create and Curate' as national examples of good practice.

Arts Development is recognised nationally for its innovative approaches to health, regeneration and social inclusion. We recently commissioned a study to evidence the impact participatory arts have on the mental health of some of the most marginalised of Aberdeen's citizens. This is part of a wider approach to integrate arts programming into a range of strategic developments, thereby ensuring sustainability.

As an employer of upwards of 30 artists, in addition to core staff, the team is the main employer of artists in the City. Arts Development strives to provide the work/creative balance which enables part time staff to continue their own creative practice, whilst offering the best possible quality opportunities to communities: this not only makes a major contribution to the cultural vibrancy of the City, but also to the creative economy.

I firmly believe that these artists are the key to the successes we have had when engaging the Citizens of Aberdeen in Community Planning.

The Local Government Scotland Act (2003) obviously provides the legislative base for everything we are doing in the City. You will all be well versed in the main priorities of Community Planning, which are

- Delivery of national priorities, locally
- Efficient and effective service delivery
- Community engagement, consultation and participation

And of course the act emphasises the need for increased community involvement, and for Community Plans to demonstrate how local people are being supported to participate in the process. Community planning in Aberdeen is based on a simple idea:

'if all the organisations that can make a difference listen to what local people are saying, and agree on the priorities for the next 10 years to address the City's needs and agree to tackle them together then real and lasting improvements will be achieved for the City and the people who live there'

Aberdeen City's 'Strengthening Local Democracy' strategy is based on the premise that

'an active and informed concern about local issues that affect us and our neighbours is a good thing, because it promotes engaged communities and effective government'

In our Community Plan, Aberdeen futures, we gave a commitment to develop Neighbourhood Community Action Plans for every Neighbourhood in the City by 2006. 37 Neighbourhood Plans have now been agreed and are being implemented, and in some cases now re-written, by Neighbourhood Community Planning Officers. They are the key text against which we plan and measure our service delivery.

In addition, in Aberdeen, the Council has established 3 areas for delivering services: North, South and Central, to which almost without exception (Arts Development is one of them) all operational services have been devolved. These administrative areas are also being reflected through Grampian Fire and Rescue Service and Grampian Police, so we have shared boundaries in terms of service provision.

In 1994 we received a first grant from 'Programme for Partnership, later evolving into the Great Northern Partnership. This grant was to deliver arts programmes within some of the most deprived communities in Aberdeen. Some initial low key projects evidenced the impact in a small way that arts helped to engage with some of the most marginalised residents of those areas. Our work with colleagues in what was then the Office of the Chief Executive, who administered the Great Northern Partnership grants, led us to be invited to take part in Planning For Real training - the key tool Aberdeen City had decided to use to develop the NCAP's. The training was multi-disciplinary, with colleagues from the Police, local community councils, community learning staff, and others.

Planning for Real is a copyrighted consultation tool developed by the Neighbourhood Community Initiatives Foundation. It is a straightforward process involving building a model of a local area, and using a series of pre defined issue cards - on themes - at an event for a local community where the cards are placed on the map according to the residents. There's then a clear foundation for the development of the local plan. What's good about it is it's non threatening, anonymous, takes as short or as long a time as you like, you don't have to be articulate. Literate or confident to participate: and it works for all ages. Visually it's easy to relate to and an effective as a means of interpreting a local area.

We took the essence and blew the model making up into a much bigger element. so that the groups who were making models were learning some key creative skills, such as digital photograph, ceramics etc, and were using the model making process to enter into dialogue and discussion about their area. This was particularly effective with children. Working with colleagues we planned local events, where there were loads of fun things to do, food for free, raffle prizes, and local children were trained to greet people, use the map and to take ownership over the project. Some events had over 600 attendees in areas where traditionally public meetings had never succeeded in engaging with non-participants/marginalised groups. I doubt anyone even knew they were participating in an arts project!

I'd like to say it was without problems. The learning curve about partnership and multi disciplinary working was steep, and the process was never the same twice. I will have to honestly say that some colleagues did not engage and did not see it as being their role to do so:

didn't subscribe to the arts as a serious tool for engaging with communities: and didn't like a methodology for developing the plans being presubscribed.

The process of multi agency working, identifying local groups, making the models, events organisation, training, budget allocations (monies from Scottish executive Community budgeting pilot) and the follow up events were fraught with issues. But I can honestly say that Arts Development would not be in the strong position now that it is in Aberdeen, without the experience and that learning opportunity. Planning for Real:

- Started us on a clear new pathway and clearly embedded us as a partner in delivering on community planning objectives
- Opened the door to a range of new partnerships and relationships, such as with the Police and Community Councils
- Started us thinking of a range of new ways we could use the arts as a tool for information dissemination and consultation
- Gave us a clear start ahead of others on delivering NCAP's with the new local knowledge built up.
- Made me reassess how we deliver – hence we moved to area based Community Arts Officers, before it was imposed upon us
- Warts and all - made me really clear about the barriers, pitfalls and problems
- Evidenced the effectiveness of what we knew - that the arts are an extremely effective way of engaging with the residents of our City in having their say.

Planning for Real was a catalyst for the next 10 years of work for the Team, in the range of possibilities it opened, and that was combined with new technological partners. So, essentially, PFR led us to explore a range of possibilities where the arts are used as a consultation mechanism and/or focus for disseminating information/awareness raising. Since those first events, we have worked to consolidate a reputation for genuine, meaningful arts consultation in communities, exploited by area services. We have argued the case, successfully, against service disaggregation, I believe by evidencing the effectiveness of how we operate within obvious restrictions.

Examples of projects:

- Torry billboards
- Slavery
- PFR events
- Middlefield Gardens
- Older Peoples strategy/Better government for older people
- HLN work
- YMA

Issues/ Pitfalls

- The attitude and perception that art in communities is somehow of lesser cultural value than artists driven work; that as a result the quality of not only the product, but the participation and the process is inferior to artists driven practice
- Low profit – day to day graft, which ensures that meaningful engagement, is not sexy, glamorous or valued.
- Constant battle to balance service delivery with the need to raise project funds and a wish to influence strategic development
- Maintaining a clear understanding of changing and evolving local government priorities in a period of rapid and radical change

- Sustaining work in neighbourhoods and finding new ways to pay for and maintain involvement at all times maintaining quality in what we do, dealing with increased demand from partners and elected members
- Delivering on community planning objectives and 37 neighbourhood community action plans with limited budgets and a small team thinly spread.
- Ensuring partnerships are meaningful and equal
- Knowing when to let go – e.g. establishing station house as an independent project.
- For me in particular, maintaining a case for participation in the arts for its own sake, not solely as a means for delivering on others objectives.
- Delivering on Best Value Service Review objectives whilst juggling staff management, fundraising, buildings, budgets, monitoring and evaluation and all the other key elements we need to have in place.

The Future - Series of questions:

- Our identity: We have a clear foundation in terms of how we have used the arts to deliver on community planning – how do we develop this in the light of the challenges we face?
- Cultural Entitlements/Drat Culture bill: How can we ensure local people have a meaningful role in how they are agreed, and then delivered on?
- N.C.A.P.'s: How can we establish budgets and cultural plans, which balance against service resources? How do we play our part in COSLA's proposals for neighbourhood environment standards? What's our part within Neighbourhood service teams? How do we deliver and develop service level agreements for all 3 areas on a limited budget?
- Service Standards: How do we establish quality benchmarks for community arts participation, which don't exist anywhere nationally?
- Cultural Centre: How do we ensure a building fit for purpose, place ourselves at the heart of a new development and a potential partnership with Peacock Visual Arts?
- Strategy Development: How can we take any influence we have on policy and strategic development – not just cultural but across health, regeneration and others – to the next level?

The Transformation Agenda: Transforming public services requires us to respond/change at a much quicker pace than ever before. It challenges us to look at why what we do is important – look at what it is we achieve, to examine this closely to ensure our service planning links to the transformation programme.

- How do we break down departmental barriers?
 - How do we create a "fit for purpose service"/ to meet *best value* requirements? We may need to pick apart everything we have done before and the ways we do things. We need to maintain a service through a period of radical change, work more closely to deliver services across local authorities; and make sure local people influence service priorities. The Regeneration Masterplanning process provides us with a key role in engaging communities: proposed radical redevelopment's for the city centre can't be just physical – how do we work with the private sector to ensure that project embraces dramatic cultural as well as transformation?
 - How do we keep developing new fresh tools for community engagement that respond to the changing climate, and take the partners with us?