

# Towards Cultural Co-design

Connecting Communities Through Culture

Year 1 evaluation executive summary report



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## Introduction

The Connecting Communities through Culture programme in Birmingham is part of the *Arts and Communities* initiative to support and showcase good practice in arts and culture that brings communities together. It is jointly funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), Arts Council England (ACE) National Lottery grants and Birmingham City Council.

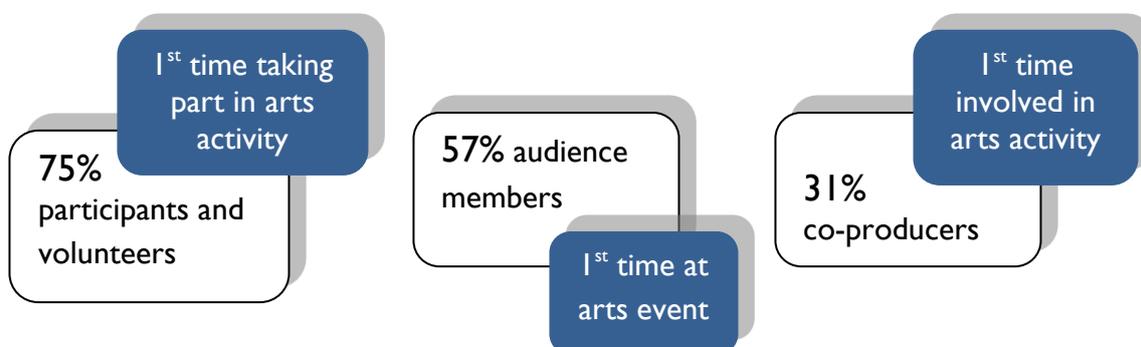
*Arts and Communities* supports programmes in Birmingham, Bradford, Bristol and Burnley that locate arts activity within local communities and use the arts to increase participation, build common ground and promote stronger and more integrated communities. Each programme within the initiative has taken a different approach to achieving its aims. Birmingham allocated equal amounts of funding across the 10 Districts that make up the city to stimulate 10 locally developed arts projects, reflective of diverse local communities' ideas and needs and delivered through the mechanism of Local Arts Fora (LAFs) and project co-ordinators.

The core outcomes for the Birmingham programme were to increase community engagement in arts and culture across a range of diverse groups and communities, overcoming the barriers to arts participation; to develop the local arts infrastructure by rolling out a model of cultural co-design and co-production; to provide opportunities for improved understanding of values and culture between different communities in the city; and to offer opportunities for people to come together to show what they have achieved.

## Delivery against outcomes

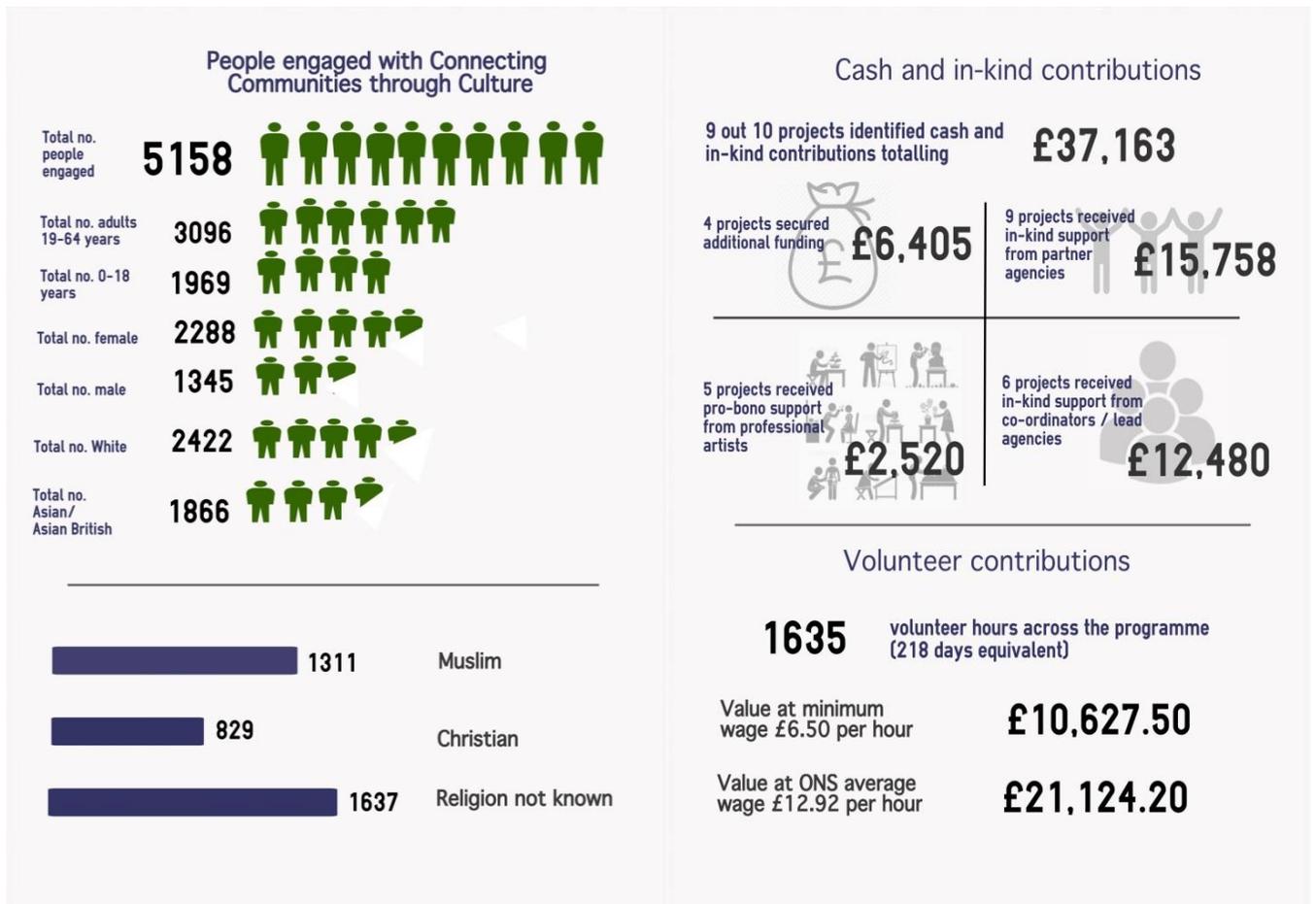
### Participation

Overall, LAFs and co-ordinators rose to the challenge and all areas delivered new arts and cultural activity. There is evidence that new people have been engaged and that they are willing to engage again in the future. However the projects have not reached the large numbers achieved through the Cultural Pilots primarily because there was less funding and additional resources to create large scale events.



Significant achievements have been made in engaging people and working with local stakeholders given that the challenge was to work in areas of low participation and infrastructure<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Available figures; data collection was inconsistently captured across demographic categories



The Birmingham desire to enable new arts activity in every District of the city meant the relatively modest programme budget was thinly spread, with £90,000 allocated to project delivery which equated to £9,000 for each project. Considering the investment of time required to initiate activity in many of the project areas, the indicative per capita cost of people engaged appears to provide reasonable value for money.

Total project budget	£90,000	÷	5158	participants	=	£17.50 per person
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In addition, however, 9 out of 10 projects were able to supplement the project budget with cash and in-kind contributions to enhance delivery on the ground. Volunteers also made significant valuable contributions in their neighbourhoods.

### Infrastructure

Across the city, local people who can act as ‘energisers’ for change were identified through Connecting Communities and new groups were involved in arts and cultural activities for the first time. Local planning or steering groups for projects were set up and linked to the LAFs and one or two appear sustainable. New artists have been supported and developed and existing artists have extended their experience and networks. In terms of the Connecting Communities engagement scale most people engaged in activities at the ‘inform’ and ‘consult’ points of the scale and the challenge for Year 2 is to move more people towards co-design and co-production.

INCREASING LEVEL OF IMPACT					
	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	WORK TOGETHER	EMPOWER
Community engagement goal	To provide the people in CC areas with information about arts and cultural activity and how to get involved	To engage people in the C2 research to generate ideas for the Connecting Communities projects	To provide opportunities for people to take part, as audiences, participants or volunteers in local arts and cultural activity	To partner with local people in developing ideas, options and preferred solutions and implement them	To place final decision-making in the hands of the public
Promise to the public	We will keep you informed about arts and culture opportunities	We will listen to your ideas and provide feedback on how what you said has influenced decisions	We will provide a range of ways for you to be involved	We will work together to develop ideas for local arts and cultural activity and make them happen	We (or you) will implement what you decide
Connecting Communities ways to engage	Promoting arts and cultural activity Community Marketing	Research phase for C2 Listening exercises	Participatory arts and cultural activities Steering Groups	Co- design and co- production	Budget devolved to local group
Evidence for Connecting Communities	Number of events and activities How were these marketed?	C2 report	Participation in workshops/creating art and cultural activity with a maker, artist or producer, involvement on Steering Groups	Local people design/plan/commission/ implement arts and cultural activity with coordinator /partners/artists	Community-led and managed arts and cultural activity

Adapted from the International Association for Public Participation IAP2 Public Participation spectrum see <http://www.iap2.org>

It is more challenging to identify how Connecting Communities has contributed to the overall stability and capacity of the Local Arts Fora, particularly as 5 of them had new lead agencies at the start of the programme. Even for established Fora, delivering something as complex as a Connecting Communities project was a 'big ask' and for many LAF members it was outside personal and professional comfort zones. Capacity building for LAFs, new co-ordinators and volunteers has been highlighted as a priority for the future. However, people taking on the co-ordinator role have gained valuable experience and new skills and know how they would do things differently next time.

Structurally, LAFs have extended their networks into areas where people did not previously engage formally with the arts and they have established new venues around the city for arts and cultural activity, helping to overcome some of the barriers to participation by providing free activities in places that are easy for people to get to.



Barriers to participation in arts and cultural activity	Connecting Communities response
Affordability – people cannot afford to pay for arts or cultural experiences	All activities were offered for free  All activities held in local areas that were accessible by walking/ local bus to reduce cost of transport
Not knowing what is on offer	Each of LAF/ CC programmes used local websites / social media to promote activities  Worked with local partners e.g. libraries/ schools/ venues to promote activities
Perceived cultural elitism – a sense that ‘arts and culture’ are for educated, wealthy, middle-classes people, not ‘for us’, people might feel too intimidated to participate	Activities that were co-designed with local residents reflected their own ideas  One project enabled Christian & Muslim groups to find common ground and address cultural barriers to imagery
Public transport deficiencies and issues of distance – Birmingham is a large city and many people are not willing to travel into the centre to arts and cultural activity	All activities held in local areas that were accessible by walking/ local bus  Activities held in parks, a cafe, schools and community centres known to people – art activities, exhibitions and performances for the first time in some neighbourhoods – bring art to people
Community safety concerns – in some areas people do not feel safe in their neighbourhood and would not look to engage with local activities	The question of where people feel safe was considered when planning activities – research identified local places and spaces that would, and would not, be considered as safe places to take part by local people
Lack of time	Fitting activities into family schedules, after school and weekends, worked well

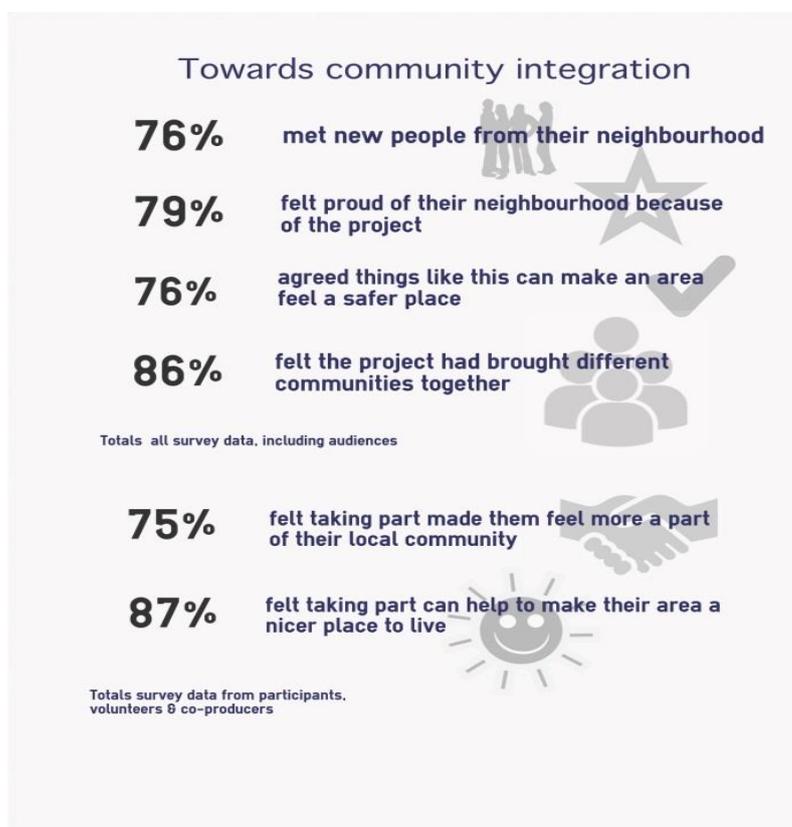


Photo: Laura Breakwell, Hodge Hill

## Integration

Each local project has taken a different approach to delivering integration and strong foundations have been laid down where communities have come together around the Connecting Communities events and activities. It is too soon to say what the impact of bringing people together to share arts and cultural activities will be in even the short term. What is clear is that Connecting Communities has brought together different groups of people who may not necessarily have come together in any other way and has delivered arts and cultural activity that has been inter-generational, ethnically diverse and brought together able-bodied and disabled people from different communities of interest.

The programme has created opportunities for conversations within and between communities and enabled people to talk with others who are not the same as them. These conversations provided a chance to understand more about people from other cultures, faiths and abilities and this can foster the spirit of integration and understanding.



## Improving health

While health is not an explicit outcome that is being measured by either the programme funders or the Cultural Commissioning Team, there is some evidence that where people have engaged as participants, volunteers and co-producers, some have experienced outcomes that can be measured against the 5 Ways to Wellbeing.

## Conclusions

Compared with the other towns and cities in the *Arts and Communities* initiative, Birmingham's aspiration was different, with the drive for co-design and co-production to create sustainability for local arts infrastructure within the context of changing public services. As a result of the programme, there is a growing sense that people are becoming clearer about what is meant by participation, co-design and co-production in a local arts and culture context.

Connecting Communities has made an excellent start to bringing arts and cultural activities, participation, co-design and co-production to areas in the city with little existing arts and cultural activity or infrastructure. The numbers of people engaged are relatively small in each area but people have been able to access arts and culture in their neighbourhood, the majority of them for the first time, and that was the aim.

There is a real need to build a shared understanding of the programme aims and outcomes and for everyone to be clear about the drive to build local arts infrastructure that is sustainable. Real foundations have been laid – new venues, steering groups, new artists – but the emerging infrastructure is fragile and requires further development to become self-sustaining in local communities.

Issues with the evaluation process reduced the available body of evidence for the programme. The purpose of evaluation and the principles of reflective practice could be more widely shared and understood and the mechanisms for capturing evidence collaboratively designed and agreed for any future programmes.

There is learning from the Connecting Communities programme around commissioning that could inform Birmingham City Council's Future Council agenda and scope to align future programmes with other strategic agendas in the city such as the Public Health preventative agenda.

### 8.5 Recommendations

The first year of Connecting Communities has seen each project make a positive start on building relationships, and get people more involved in arts and culture near to where they live. Everyone involved in the process to date is more knowledgeable, experienced and informed about what works and about the challenges involved in designing, implementing and evaluating a programme of this kind.

#### **I. Continue working in the same areas as Year 1**

In order to consolidate this learning we recommend that any Year 2 programme builds, where practicable, on the learning from Year 1 and consolidates the energy and relationships that were created in the first year. For the programme to really capitalise on the investment already made and to create a more sustainable approach (one that has some ability to continue after the current round of funding), working in the same areas as Year 1 means that work can continue to build engagement, capacity and infrastructure.

We are not recommending that contracts with LAF lead agencies or Connecting Communities co-ordinators simply roll over; rather we recommend that the Culture Commissioning Team considers, in conjunction with LAFs and co-ordinators, the learning from Year 1 and adapts the programme accordingly.

## **2. Embed the principles of co-design and co-production across the whole programme**

We recommend that the flexible way of working that has emerged for the Culture Commissioning Team over Year 1 is developed into a dialogue-based commissioning model that includes co-design at the programme devising stage. For example, where local steering or planning groups have emerged from Year 1, how can these be included in planning for Year 2?

Put in place a common, shared and well understood definition of the Connecting Communities engagement model using cultural co-design and co-production and use this to really build on the work already done. Share the learning from Year 1 with new project leads or co-ordinators in Year 2.

Share the learning for the Culture Commissioning Team on embedding co-design as a new way of working within the wider council to inform the move towards Future Council.

## **3. Be explicit about expectations**

As part of future programme planning, conversations should be held between the Culture Commissioning Team and LAFs/local partners to ensure a shared understanding of the programme outcomes and to clarify expectations. For instance, it would be useful to have a conversation about whether or not every project must deliver against all programme outcomes and how programme co-ordination can ensure all outcomes are addressed across the city as a whole.

Planning discussions at project level need to be informed in an open and honest way by programme outcomes, funding requirements and artistic aspirations, as well as by listening to local people. Projects should discuss (in accessible terms) which outcomes they are aiming to deliver against and be clear about how they plan to achieve them. They should also agree which communities they are aiming to reach, along with the how and the why behind these decisions. Projects should think through how they intend capture qualitative and quantitative information about who is involved, what is working well and how the projects are achieving outcomes for local people and the wider community; they may need support to contribute effectively to the programme evidence base.

Projects should have the flexibility to use locally appropriate, robust and meaningful mechanisms for collecting information that is appropriate for the people they are working with and allows for data aggregation and analysis for comparisons to take place across the programme as a whole.

#### 4. Embed opportunities for learning

We recommend that regular reviews are built into programme management to identify and address issues as they arise. This would form part of a collective problem-solving approach and move away from a non-productive and time consuming apportioning of blame to a more open and transparent dialogue that focuses on accountability. This would create an environment that recognises that mistakes happen and that becoming aware of them opens opportunities for learning and personal and organisational growth.

We recommend that time is built into the whole process for sharing and knowledge exchange that draws on expertise at all levels. For instance, LAF meetings or co-ordinators meetings could include planned time to share what works and to encourage people to become solution-focused by sharing problems or barriers to delivery, drawing on the knowledge and expertise in the network.

A skills development pathway for new co-ordinators could be explored which could help to support the future infrastructure of community-based arts and culture. Peer-to-peer mentoring of co-ordinators, drawing on the skills and experience of more experienced co-ordinators, could help to better embed some of the approaches to co-design and co-production that have proved difficult for some to interpret in Year 1.

The creative use of budgets and how to increase resources through match-funding and in-kind contributions has been identified as capacity building need for people taking on the co-ordinator role and experienced co-ordinators could share their knowledge through the LAF network. On a practical note, it would be useful if basic costing rules could be agreed for in-kind contributions and applied across all projects to facilitate future cost analysis.

Other opportunities for Local Arts Fora and co-ordinators to meet, celebrate and share expertise could be explored. For instance, an online platform could be developed where projects could share their progress, record feedback from participants and audiences and promote their achievements more widely in the city. It could also act as a point of contact between the other *Arts and Communities* towns and cities.

Thinking about the end of programme Symposium should happen from the beginning and should inform programme planning; that would allow opportunities for the Symposium to be even more participative and allow projects to work towards it more consciously as a goal for local people.

  
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*Bringing Birmingham's Communities together through Culture*



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