

Back to Ours

Interim Evaluation - Summary

May 2019

This is the summary of the interim evaluation of Back to Ours, Arts Council England's Creative People and Places (CPP) programme for Hull. Using Arts Council England's CPP National Research Questions as a framework, we explore the programme outcomes in three ways: engaging and inspiring new audiences; high quality art delivered where it matters; and developing a Back to Ours model. We then finish with conclusions and recommendations.

Context

Hull is a city of 260,000 people on the Humber Estuary in the North East of England. Since the 1970s the decline in the city's maritime and fishing industries led to complex socio-economic challenges and negative perceptions of Hull. This is reflected in its ranking as the third most deprived local authority (2015 Index of Multiple Deprivation) and being 'significantly worse than average' against 21 out of 32 of Public Health England's key criteria.

Although the city has a strong cultural heritage - for example, its associations with the poet Philip Larkin and the Hull Truck Theatre Company - arts engagement was below the national average.

However, Hull's time as 2017 UK City of Culture saw £100 million of public sector investment in the city, a massive increase in people engaging with arts and culture, and a positive shift in its profile.

The Back to Ours Festival and brand was initially developed as part of Hull2017, and its transition and adaptation as part of Hull's CPP programme has offered both an opportunity and a challenge. The Back to Ours team was not fully in place until well into 2018 but with a requirement to deliver by the end of 2019.

A clear vision was set out, to:

- Deliver outstanding arts and cultural experiences with and for the people of Hull, which are open and welcome to all;
- Support the commissioning, production, creation and touring of new, original and inspirational work;
- Engage local people as audiences, participants, creators and commissioners;
- Bring the arts to life in familiar settings as you've never seen them before.

In its first real year of operation, the programme comprised three strands, the Back to Ours Festival, the Commissions and the community Hubs, with a strong focus on estates and communities outside the city centre: Bransholme (Central & North); East Hull; North Hull; Orchard Park and Derringham.

A robust data collection and evaluation model has been developed alongside programme delivery, underpinned by a clear 'Story of Change'. A unique dimension has been recruitment and training of a team of Chat to Ours volunteers, who play a key role in participatory evaluation.

Key figures

93,192 engagements:

87,597 audience members

5,295 participants

750,000 digital audience

148 activities

450 hours of delivery

3,000 volunteer hours

£20,000 overall volunteering value

5 community hubs established

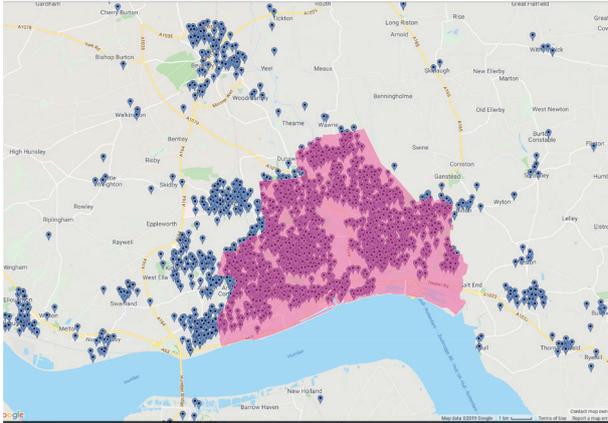
"Back to Ours is one of the most positive 'local' outcomes of the year of culture, to be able to see such high quality theatre and music events within walking distance of my house is fantastic!!"

Audience member, February 2019 Festival

"We love that it's near to where we live... We love Back to Ours."

East Hull families at *The Allotment*,
St Aidan's Church

Engaging and inspiring new audiences



Postcodes of Back to Ours attenders mapped to the Hull area.

Back to Ours has:

- Reached a huge number of people: over 87,000 audience members and over 5,000 participants. 63% came from Hull, another 24% from surrounding areas, 13% from further afield.
- A 'reach' that covers and goes well beyond Hull, spreading both to the surrounding East Riding and nationally for many events.
- A good spread across the different areas of Hull itself, including from the Hub communities of Derringham, Orchard Park and Bransholme (35% of engagers came from HU5, 6 and 7 postcodes).
- Reached those who don't usually engage in the arts – 35% of audiences said they hadn't engaged in the arts in the last year.
- Been very good at inspiring continued attendance – those who attend Back to Ours events are very likely to be inspired to engage further. 77% of audiences surveyed said attending Back to Ours made them more likely to attend arts, only 2% said it hadn't. In short, audiences love the shows.

“...‘Men in Sheds’ has been remarkable. There has been massive change in the men’s willingness to get involved in a creative project and our expectations of what they can achieve... When we began we were just talking and now the sessions are a hive of activity and creativity.”

Commissioned Artists via Artists’ Survey

Reaching key groups

- Back to Ours has been successful in reaching those least likely to engage in the arts, and lower socio-economic groups, BAME and disabled communities who are attending but at lower proportions than within the city population. Further work is needed to ensure Back to Ours reaches more of these targeted groups.
- A number of innovative approaches to engaging diverse communities and those least likely to engage in the arts are being put into place. For example Back to Ours is increasingly working to engage key audience segments, such as the Polish community which is a significant minority within the city’s increasingly diverse population.
- Back to Ours are using a creative action learning approach to remove barriers. This includes hyper-local marketing, pre-show/ front of house engagement, alternative ticketing arrangements, growth in cultural confidence and community-led programming through the community Hubs, all of which are likely to lead to engaging new audiences in the longer term.

Audience Development

From October 2018, Back to Ours started to focus on developing audiences from Hull’s Polish community. A consultant worked to programme a non-verbal touring performance *Mr Satie - Made in Paper* from Polish company Teatr Atofri. The entire festival brochure was translated into Polish. A Polish Masterclass was run for Chat to Ours volunteers who learnt a few words in Polish and about Polish culture.

Anecdotal evidence suggests this was successful in attracting a larger Polish-speaking audience not only to this but also to other Back to Ours events.

Chat to Ours observation, February 2019 Festival

“At the end of the performance prolonged clapping and a standing ovation... audience members provided spontaneous comments: amazing, absolutely brilliant, really good.”

Chat to Ours observation, *Fagin’s Twist*

High quality art, delivered where it matters

Back to Ours has:

- A commitment to excellence of process and product which forms the backbone of all their programming.
- Combined 'the fun and the familiar' (professional Dolly Parton and Elvis Presley impersonators) alongside exceptional work by nationally and internationally significant artists (Black Grape, Casus and Lost in Translation), whilst supporting many of Hull's own artists to grow in skill and ambition.
- Built internal challenge, and space for external challenge, into the programme, meaning that Back to Ours is truly embedding an action learning philosophy into understanding and ensuring quality.
- Captivated audiences and participants who are enthused by the work and see it as high quality.
- A clear commitment to a genuine and empowering approach to engagement. The community's voice is increasingly being heard through the Hubs - resident focused groups operating in the target estates - and involving them in an informal and accessible conversation about the programme. This has potential to develop into a distinctive and genuine collaboration.
- Developed a network of 11 non-traditional and alternative Festival venues outside the city centre, now regularly used for arts programming including: William Gemmell Social Club, Wilberforce College, Freedom Centre, Willows Social Club, Northpoint Shopping Centre, Sirius Academy North.
- Developed the capacity of the local arts sector through the R&D stages of the commissions and through partnership with other arts organisations. In particular supporting more partnership working with communities and offering artists a challenge and a space to explore more ambitious projects.

"Bullish was an exciting production, different to other queer work that I have seen... I found the production highly skilled, original and theatrically confident."

Peer Reviewer, *Bullish*

The Boxer

After a performance of *Delicate Flowers* by Single Story Theatre at Willows Social Club an audience member approached us to provide feedback and thanks. Her father-in-law had recently been diagnosed with Alzheimer's and had been a professional boxer at a very high level in his younger days. A Chat to Ours volunteer spoke with him and he became engaged in a long, detailed conversation about his boxing career. He had fought and sparred with the best boxers of the time. He had narrowly missed the British Heavyweight Champion title due to a cut eye. He didn't think women were built to box but was interested in seeing the play.

The prompt of this play had brought back many memories long forgotten - his relatives agreed he had not spoken as much for a long time. He had enjoyed the performance and applauded the talented lass who 'really got that straight punch just right'. His family commented that his facial expressions and interaction levels during the show had been heightened, and they were staggered at his recall of memories and level of concentration, which he had not demonstrated in weeks.

Chat to Ours observation,
February 2019 Festival

"I was blown away by the power of the show"

Audience member, *Delicate Flowers*,
Willows Social Club

Bransholme

Bransholme Hub emerged from Back to Ours programme during Hull2017. Back to Ours has continued to programme in the area. Most activity has taken place at Northpoint Shopping Centre, a place valued by local people as a community asset - safe, warm and accessible. Hub members are increasingly developing their own ideas, identifying a priority need for family friendly, intergenerational projects to address local problems of social isolation and lack of opportunity, amongst both older and younger people. BtO has negotiated with Northpoint to provide a longer-term base, decking out a disused shop unit as 'The Living Room'. A recent bid to National Lottery Community Fund has secured a substantial 3-year grant to run 'The Living Room' as a physical hub for locally-led participatory arts activity, commencing summer 2019.

Chat to Ours observation,
February 2019 Festival

Developing a Back to Ours model

Even at this early stage a distinctive Back to Ours model is beginning to emerge.

More informal co-working: everyone part of Back to Ours

- The team has a warm, inclusive and capacity-building style – they are good at recognising assets others have missed.
- Back to Ours' brand reflects these approaches – the inclusion, the shared journey and the warmth. This is a great basis for communicating the thinking around programming and the role of community voice more clearly.

"...this is the ethos for Back to Ours, we are a bit of a family, we're a family with an agenda which is to get people involved in the arts"

Back to Ours Director

- Back to Ours has a strong commitment to ensuring that community voice shapes the programme, going well beyond the Community Hubs.
- This is an explicitly informal approach, drawing on interpersonal skills and relationships – creating a conversation around what works and what is needed, from which the Director shapes the programming.

"This company is perfect for community and audience engagement. The team really hits the nail on the head for that. I don't think any other production houses in Hull do this."

Commissioned Artists via Artists' Survey

- This informal approach is very effective and empowering, drawing, as it does, on a commitment to socially engaged arts practice and Asset Based Community Development. It relies very strongly on a shared understanding and style in the team, for this reason it needs to be more clearly articulated and shared.

Programming unusual work in unusual places

- Back to Ours is built around programming unexpected events, and artform combinations, in unusual venues, mixing the 'the fun and the familiar' with the new and challenging. This brings shows to venues much closer to Back to Ours' audiences, encouraging new engagement.

"[It is] ace going to different places like this... seeing unexpected locations... it's refreshing."

Audience members, Feb 2019 Festival

- Programming shows in unexpected places has been very effective at building local partnerships, particularly reaching beyond the arts, and developing skills and capacity. This will broaden the range of programming venues in the city to the benefit of the wider arts sector as well as to the communities themselves.

Being imaginative and giving new approaches a try

- The team and programme embody action learning in their whole approach, allowing them to adapt the programme on a regular basis and try out new approaches as data gradually emerges to inform future practice.
- The evaluation approach has been designed to support this – excellent examples being the development of the Story of Change model, the Chat to Ours team and the embedding of reflective thinking for members of the team. Next steps will involve a more structured approach to reflective sessions and additional input from the external evaluator and Critical Friend.

Chat to Ours

Chat to Ours is a group of volunteers originally trained in survey work during Hull 2017. Following an idea from the volunteers themselves, Back to Ours has further developed their role and skills. With training from the University of Hull and the mentoring of the Back to Ours evaluator, Chat to Ours are now fully involved in the design, gathering and analysis of data on audience experience at Back to Ours, using a participant observation approach.

This offers valuable insights and an additional level of co-production and community voice in the programming and evaluation of Back to Ours.

The Chat to Ours team already report a huge increase in skills and confidence. New members are being recruited via the Hubs to increase the size and reach of Chat to Ours.

Conclusion and recommendations

Broadly, Back to Ours has succeeded in reaching those least likely to engage with the arts, and providing a high quality experience that audiences have appreciated and wanted to connect with again. In terms of Back to Ours' approach and learning, there is definitely an emerging delivery and evaluation model, parts of which are specific to Hull, unique among CPPs, or certainly not widely explored before.

As an interim report, these conclusions, and indeed the recommendations below, are naturally tentative, reflecting the fact that Back to Ours is just a year into their programming.

We would recommend:

- **Continuing the new model of event data collection** which covers audience feedback as well as demographics (as developed for the February 2019 Festival), and ensure a balanced sample of events are monitored.
- **Considering using Audience Spectrum and Mosaic analysis** to aid the existing targeting of work to reach some of the groups most underrepresented.
- **Further developing the artist and programmer feedback** around Arts Council England's quality metrics. This will enable the quality of the work produced to be demonstrated.
- **Continuing the reappraisal of the Festivals.** Even though they are well liked and strongly support the brand, the festivals have a huge impact on staff time and capacity. The data is inconclusive as to whether they are the best way to reach new audiences in the current format. Current plans to slightly alter the model - focusing on local resonance, promotion via the community, and a higher proportion of participants - are likely to be more effective in achieving Back to Ours' aims.
- **Building in more time and space for reflection** and implementation of learning throughout the programme. This can be done through bringing together Hub members, artists and stakeholders, at key points throughout the programme, continuing dialogue and joint learning with the wider CPP network and exploring emerging models of engagement.
- **Articulating the thinking around Back to Ours' community voice approach** so that it is more clearly expressed, allowing analysis of its effectiveness and sharing of good practice.
- **Further building on the gains of the programme so far** - for example, the strong buy-in from partners and venues, the respect of the community and volunteers, and the skills and time of the staff team.
- **Expanding the strong community voice in the programme**, particularly through the Community Hubs, the work with venue partners and the Chat to Ours team's input to the evaluation.

Ruth Melville, April 2019

Commissioned by Back to Ours

