

# Back to Ours

## Phase 1 Final Evaluation – Summary

February 2020

This is the summary of the evaluation of Phase 1 of Back to Ours, Arts Council England's Creative People and Places (CPP) programme for Hull, which ran from 2017 to December 2019. 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.

Key figures			
<b>327,039</b> Audience members	<b>7,612</b> Participants	<b>1.38M</b> Digital audience	<b>6,438</b> Volunteer hours
<b>330</b> Activities	<b>11 new</b> Non-traditional venues	<b>90%</b> Of audiences come from lower engaging groups	<b>32%</b> From lower socio-economic groups DE

### Context

Hull is a city of 260,000 people 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 fourth most deprived local authority (2019 Index of Multiple Deprivation).

Although the city has a strong cultural heritage, arts engagement is 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 Hull 2017, 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.

During Phase 1 of Back to Ours, there were five strands of work:

- The Back to Ours Festival
- The Commissions
- The Hubs
- Co-commissioned Festivals and
- Back to Ours Productions.

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 Back to Ours volunteers, who play a key role in participatory evaluation.

## Engaging and inspiring new audiences



Postcodes of Back to Ours attenders mapped to the Hull area

### Back to Ours has:

- A 'reach' well beyond Hull for the whole programme.
- A good spread across the different areas within the city, including the target low engagement areas where Community Hubs are based: 45% of engagers came from HU5, 6 and 7 postcodes, 13% specifically from the Hub target areas.
- Reached those less likely to engage in the arts. 45% of audiences said they'd not engaged in the arts in the last year. 90% came from medium or low engaging groups, with reach to the lowest engaging groups rising between 2018 and 2019.

*"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

- Engaged people from lower socio-economic groups, in particular reaching areas of multiple deprivation where the Hubs are operating and appealing to people from the lowest socio-economic groups DE.
- Attracted people from BAME communities but slightly below city population levels. This is

partly the result of work being targeted at areas which typically have a mainly White British population. There is still more work to do in reaching and engaging with these communities and monitoring this reach.

### Inspiring people

- **Audiences love the shows.** Attending a show means continued attendance – with crossover audiences attracted by the Back to Ours' brand and enthused by this to do more.
- **People come back for more.** Those who attend Back to Ours events are very likely to be inspired to engage further and become regular audience members.

### Reaching new audiences

Back to Ours has:

- A number of different approaches to engaging diverse communities and those least likely to engage in the arts.
- Taken a thoughtful action learning approach to removing barriers - marketing, communications, front of house, ticketing and cultural confidence - all of which are showing results in the audiences reached.

#### Ensuring Access

The Back to Bransholme 'Access Area' was well-used as a space with seating and space away from the crowd. BSL interpretation was provided every night. Working with the interpreter who was well networked in the D/deaf community from the beginning meant that the show was promoted to and attended by D/deaf audiences. Noise-cancelling headphones were used every night by different audience members, whether those with additional needs or for young children scared of loud noises. Future plans include a desire to provide audio description.

*"Phenomenal. Fantastic. Out of this world. Never seen anything like it. Every minute brilliant. Best thing I've EVER seen."*

Audience member, DNA

## High quality art, developed in partnership with people

- A commitment to excellence of process and product forms the backbone of all Back to Ours programming.
- This is particularly ensured through the internal and external challenge which is built in. Back to Ours is truly embedding an action learning philosophy into understanding and ensuring quality.
- The artistic vision includes: challenging, excellent and resonant work; co-developed and produced with local people and participants; located in everyday places; and great fun to be part of.
- Audiences and participants are captivated and enthused by the work and see it as high quality.

### Holistic approach to excellence

Any understanding of quality within Back to Ours needs to see the experience *'the art'* starting not at the door of the hall where the play is held, or the car park within Bransholme, but at the point people first hear about it.

The experience is curated and supported from the beginning, through a careful process, so that people feel the event offers something for them, and that they will be ok to come to it. This careful and holistic approach to programming allows for much more 'challenge' to audiences to take risks to be placed within the setting: they have already been sold on it well before they walk through the door.

- Partnering with arts organisations like Casus and Cluster Arts supports audiences across the city to engage with international quality work.

*"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 challenge for Phase 2 in terms of assessing excellence needs to move from feeling the need to justify it as high-quality work, to exploring what impact the quality itself has on participants and audiences.
- Back to Ours is clearly committed to a genuine and empowering approach to engagement. Community voice in the programme is ensured

through the mechanism of the Hubs – resident focused groups operating in the target estates – and the approach of involving them in an informal and accessible conversation about the programme. This has developed into a distinctive and genuine collaboration, the level of time and skill needed to achieve this should be recognised and shared.

- Through the commissions, Back to Ours has developed the capacity of the local sector in terms of partnership working with local communities and offering a space for them to explore more ambitious projects than previous funding has allowed. There is a need for more support to develop local artists so they can deliver work locally and engage further with Hull communities. Back to Ours can play a partial role in this, but this should be delivered in partnership with the rest of the cultural sector.

### Working in Bransholme

Back to Ours have been programming in Bransholme since the start, building on work started during 2017 and developing an active local Hub. Work with Northpoint Shopping Centre, valued by local people as a community asset which is safe, warm and accessible, has led to the establishment of the Hub-led 'Living Room', a physical social space funded by NLCF for three years and addressing issues of social isolation and lack of opportunity identified by Hub members.

Running alongside this, the team developed and delivered 'Back to Bransholme', a major site-specific show encompassing circus, opera, dance and music, and with a huge community cast alongside professional opera singers and circus performers, performed in North Point's car park. Entirely rooted in the history and stories of Bransholme and developed and marketed through a series of local conversations, this was the culmination of Phase 1. Hyperlocal by design and planning, 39% of the 5,500 audience members came from Bransholme, and another 10% from the other Hub areas.

*"It's all about Bransholme, the war and all the different times and that... just bear with it, Paul... it's gonna be a bit fucking arty but you will get it mate."*

Audience member at Back to Bransholme explaining the show

## Developing a Back to Ours model

At the end of two full years of programming, an exciting model is beginning to emerge through Back to Ours, enabling deep and lasting engagement with arts, among and within neighbourhoods where the arts have never been recognised before.

This is leading to an increased sense of ownership, and ability to take action further within their neighbourhoods.

### Programming unexpected work in everyday places

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

*"We like the local venues especially this one as it was very close to us and less stressful with three children - a more friendly atmosphere where people would help out."*

Audience Member, Thornton Village Hall, Mr Satie

- This has been a very effective approach to building local partnerships, particularly in reaching beyond the arts, and to developing skills and capacity which will broaden the range of programming venues in the city.

### Warm, inclusive style

- The team have a warm, inclusive and capacity-building style and are good at recognising assets others have missed. The whole-hearted way in which programming partners have responded to the opportunity shows the level of interest and appetite for this work across the city.
- Back to Ours has a strong commitment to ensuring community voice shapes the programme in all aspects, going well beyond the Hubs strand. This is approached through an explicitly informal route, drawing on interpersonal skills, relationships and a sense of

creating a conversation around what works and what is needed from which the programming is developed.

- This can be an incredibly effective and empowering approach, but it takes time, and relies on the intention and skills of a very experienced and committed team.

### Clear brand audiences connect with

- The brand of Back to Ours works well with audiences to give a sense of safety and to help them take steps into new experiences. The brand highlights these approaches, the inclusion, shared journey, the everyday nature of arts and culture, and the warm welcome. This is a great basis for others to begin to understand and take on board the practice around programming and community voice more clearly.

### Commitment to making a difference to Hull's people and places

- Back to Ours is having an impact on Hull's communities, particularly in the Hub neighbourhoods, in terms of increased arts appetite and cultural confidence, in terms of sense of belonging and pride in their areas, and with a sense of value and confidence to try new things.

### Giving new things a try and learning from them

- The team and programme embody action learning in their whole approach, allowing them to adapt and change the programme on a regular basis and try out new approaches. The evaluation approach, particularly the Chat to Ours team, and the embedding of reflective thinking for members of the team tie in well to this. This explicit embedding of reflective evaluation within planning for the programme will deepen in Phase 2.

#### Chat to Ours

Recruited via the Hull 2017 volunteer team and the Hubs, Chat to Ours are a group of community researchers supported by Back to Ours to develop audience research skills. 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 members report a huge increase in skills and confidence, and the feedback and insight on audiences they provide is invaluable to Back to Ours.

## Conclusion and recommendations

Back to Ours has succeeded in meeting the Creative People and Places aims of reaching new audiences among 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 an exciting delivery and evaluation model, parts of which are specific or even unique among CPPs, or certainly haven't been widely explored before.

### We would recommend:

- Building on the success of the targeting of 'Hub areas' by using socio-economic profiling data to **identify further areas of low engagement and/or socio-economic disadvantage for targeted programming and marketing.**
- Being clear about target audiences, particularly in terms of those least to engage in the arts and BAME communities and **make realistic targets and appropriate programming decisions in order to meet them.**
- **Celebrating success in reaching and enthusing huge numbers of people** who are new to the arts and share learning with other areas and with organisations across the city. Include learning on what didn't work to give a more balanced view: sharing this report in an accessible and broad way, using Back to Ours style event and delivery, would be an ideal start.
- **Continuing the new model of delivery**, with work planned around Hub suggestions and partnership opportunities, rather than a commitment to deliver a regular Festival.
- Continuing the **extremely successful approach to marketing, ticketing and event welcome** which seems to be vital in engaging new audiences.
- **Recognising, evidencing and sharing the amount of time and resources needed** to take such an embedded (and successful) approach to marketing, develop case studies to demonstrate true cost and value using Green Book approved methods.
- **Continuing to build in time and space for reflection and implementation of learning throughout the programme.** This should include 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.
- **Looking for ways to share the learning around Back to Ours' success in engaging and empowering communities within the process.** As this is based so much on expertise, instinctive approaches and iterative learning, this might be better done through working with partners to deliver a project (learning through experience) rather than through a dry explanation.
- **Continuing to expand the strong community voice in the programme**, particularly through the Hubs, the work with venue partners and the Chat to Ours team's input to the evaluation.
- **Continuing the models of event and participant data collection**, mixing quantitative data collection which doesn't interfere with the audience experience with the chatting and observing approach of Chat to Ours to explore experience in more depth.
- **Exploring ways to develop some of the successful elements of the programme further**, further building on the gains of the programme so far – for example, the venue network, Chat to Ours etc. This has been done effectively in Bransholme with The Living Room three-year project funded under BLF.

Ruth Melville, February 2020

Commissioned by Back to Ours

