

Grants for the Arts Case Study

Creatives Across Sussex: engaging communities in song



Image courtesy of Creatives Across Sussex

Paul Ackerley, Creative Producer
Creatives Across Sussex



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Case Study Introduction

What will I learn and is it relevant to me?

Themes...

- Community singing
- Community engagement
- Large-scale participatory events

Learning...

- Developing large-scale community projects
- Engaging communities
- Building successful partnerships

Relevance...

This case study is relevant to:

- Community arts and engagement teams developing large-scale community projects
- Artists and organisations keen to develop partnerships to support community projects
- Grants for the Arts applicants who want to find out more about funded projects

Town to Earth was a participatory music project culminating in three events for community singers in unusual and contrasting settings.

Background

Creatives Across Sussex: Town to Earth

Introducing Creatives Across Sussex

Creatives Across Sussex believes culture plays an important part in achieving quality of life in Sussex. It combines both cultural and business expertise to provide a dynamic portfolio of arts development services.

We're a small and versatile community interest company with a successful track record of more than a decade of arts development in West Sussex and beyond. Highlights include delivery of the 'Ahead of the Game' cultural programme to celebrate the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games in West Sussex.

Our vision and how we work

Our vision for Creatives Across Sussex is to enable communities across the whole of Sussex to benefit socially and economically from a thriving and sustainable arts and creative infrastructure.

We achieve our vision by working in partnership with local authorities, businesses in Sussex, funding bodies, artists and communities.

We engage local people in creative activities and enable and advocate for the work of artists, producers and companies in Sussex and beyond.

The project

Town to Earth was a participatory music project culminating in three events for community singers in unusual and contrasting settings.

We used sung music, commissioned new music, sound design and visual installations to create late night promenade experiences.

Background and inspiration

I have a background as a music producer and was really interested in how people enjoy coming together to sing. I wanted to put that into the landscape at night.

I also have a long history of outdoor arts where it's often not possible to rehearse or develop work in the location where it will be performed. I wanted to see what we could achieve if we built something up slowly, working with communities on the site where they would perform.

That journey began with Whispering Woods, an artist-led project that culminated in an atmospheric performance in the woods at night.

Sussex people wanted us to do something similar in the town to transform an urban setting so we created Singing Streets.

Town to Earth is a later evolution of these projects, combining rural and urban settings. We wanted to take the success of Whispering Woods and Singing Streets and increase the depth of participation. We planned to support communities to do it themselves.

Town to Earth

Engaging communities in song

Paving the way

Previous projects, Whispering Woods and Singing Streets, had very much paved the way for Town to Earth. Singing Streets mobilised a town to connect its communities. It was the first community intervention driven by a creative project and won us valuable support. A key stakeholder in Mid-Sussex District Council spoke to Horsham District Council and that opened a door for us to work with an estate in Burgess Hill.

Developing relationships

We developed a partnership with South Downs National Park, where we would stage the finale of Town to Earth.

We started to deploy the creative team into communities. We went back to The Needles Estate where we had created Singing Streets and interrogated the name of the estate. We discovered that shipwreck timbers from The Needles on the Isle of Wight were used to build the first houses there. We started to talk to residents about it and that became the stimuli for the music we created there.

We worked simultaneously in Burgess Hill, exploring the impact of the railway on the town.

We persuaded the railway companies to allow us to rehearse and perform on the train and platform. They sponsored the project by covering the cost of every train ticket. Our team's confidence in logistics and health and safety issues really helped us build that relationship. We worked around the train timetable and became welcome guests in the space.

Recruiting participants

We approached recruiting participants like live social networking on a smaller scale. We turned up in housing estates and local authority officers introduced us to community development officers. Through those connections we began talking to people about the history of where they live and gradually gained their trust.

Groups from previous projects also got involved. Whispering Woods had been mainly older people and Singing Streets had mostly involved young families so that created a wide mix of ages.

The intergenerational aspect was really successful, particularly when it came to learning new music. The

adults took their lead from the children who were fearless and just got stuck in.

Creating excitement

Sue and I try to create an environment where the creative team can get excited about the work they do. This enables them to get other people excited. If they come up with an idea that we can't run with we will always explain why and continue to encourage their creativity.

Activity and timescale

The project took place over a six-month period, culminating in three performances in the final month.

We supported participants to take ownership of the project. The choirs helped one another and told us what we could do to support them in their performances.

We delivered two performances with communities in their local areas. One took place in The Needles Housing Estate. The other connected communities by the railway in Burgess Hill with a performance that happened on the train and train station platform and ended with a parade to a local primary school.

The finale brought those communities together to rehearse and perform in South Downs National Park. People from the estates didn't take as much advantage of the rural landscape as they could have. This project was the first real driver for them to independently explore the neighbouring South Downs and they came en masse.

Cost

The project cost approximately £100,000, of which Grants for the Arts contributed £70,000.

The additional funds came from South East Trains, South Downs National Park, Mid-Sussex and Horsham District Councils, University of Chichester support in kind and small contributions from schools, churches and a scaffolding company.

The budget was spent predominantly on artist fees with 70% spent on the creative side of the project. The rest was spent on production costs. Investment in technical expertise was essential to deliver high quality outdoor events.

Results and recommendations

Changing the world one piece at a time

The results

- 220 participants were fully immersed in the project
- 450 participants took part in the finale
- 6 communities were involved in the project
- 800 people attended the finale
- 10 artists were commissioned
- The Needles Estate has set up its own choir
- Mid-Sussex District Council has asked us to bring everyone back together to celebrate the 175th Anniversary of the birth of Southern Railway

Benefits to Creatives Across Sussex

Creatives Across Sussex was set up with the intention of outsourcing arts development and selling services back to the local authority. Town to Earth has shown how aggregating resources enables the creation of bigger scale work.

We have been able to demonstrate the results of working collectively and bringing in external funding from Arts Council England. It benefits artists' practice and keeps networks alive.

Benefits to communities and participants

Town to Earth has brought communities and individuals together. People have met and spent time with neighbours, often for the first time.

The project has built confidence and skills through learning.

The nature of the sites in which we were performing has also meant that people have had to walk and be physically active. It was a physically demanding project for some people.

Recommendations

- Start with strong ambition and a long-term vision - developing a piece of work over a long period of time enables you to deepen engagement and make a greater impact
- Break a longer-term vision down into component projects - this enables you to work with the politics of funding while strengthening production values and engagement over time
- Have deep enough conversations with a group of stakeholders from the start about something that could last 3 - 5 years - this will pave the way for future funding asks
- Work strategically in small steps towards your original vision - this will keep you moving in the right direction
- Develop friends in high places - you need people in senior positions to believe in your organisation and your vision
- Look for a cultural entrepreneur in your local authority who will be willing to take a longer term view

Find out more

<http://about.creativesacrossussex.com/>