

Arts engagement

Building trust and a ladder of engagement



Image courtesy of First Art. Members of the Bolsover Poetry Group performing at the Tapton Lock Festival in 2016.

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First Art



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By creating a wide range of opportunities for engagement, First Art helped Bolsover Poetry Group transition from grassroots participants to commissioners and performers.



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Arts engagement

Building trust and a ladder of engagement

First Art is a partnership that links cultural and community organisations working within the former coalfields of North East Derbyshire and North East Nottinghamshire.

It is a Creative People and Places project, funded by Arts Council England from 2014 - 2017 to increase arts engagement.

Since 2014, we have worked with members of the Bolsover Poetry Group to connect with our community and build meaningful engagement.

By listening and responding to their needs and interests, we have overcome the group's initial scepticism about working with us and developed powerful advocates for the arts.

"We've been here before"

"Folks like them come and go"

"We're not used to people like you coming to talk to people like us"

"People don't usually bother about places like Bolsover"

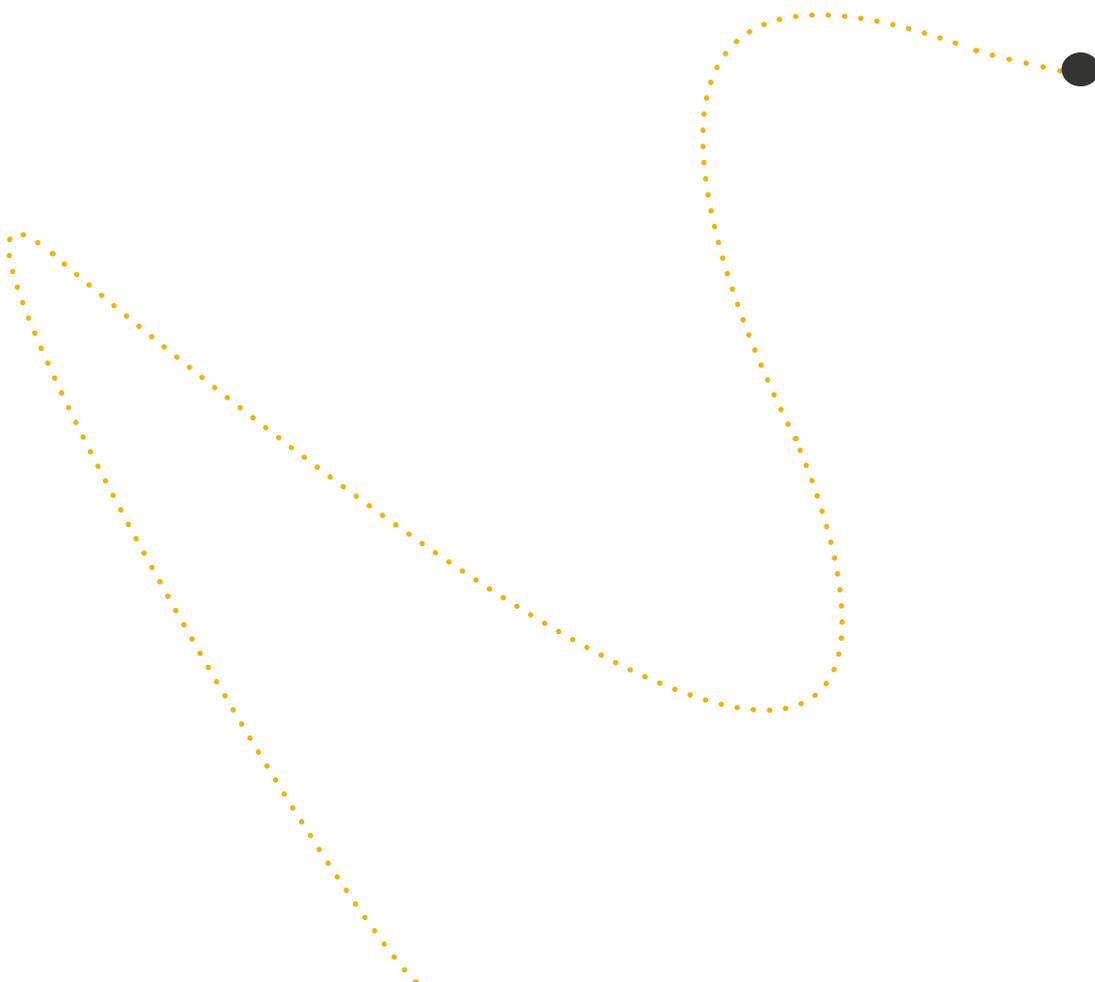
"But... you proved us wrong!"

Community consultation

One of the first things First Art delivered was a series of community consultation events around the local area. The purpose was to meet local people, to raise awareness of First Art and to begin the process of involving the community in developing our strands of work.

The Bolsover event took place in early 2015 and we identified and invited key community players with the ambition that they would become our 'Community Connectors'. It was a way for us to effectively plug into local people, get their views, spread the word and encourage contributions and engagement.

Several members of Bolsover Poetry Group attended that first meeting and made lively and valuable contributions that informed how we went on to work in Bolsover.



Maintaining communication

Following the group's initial feedback that "folks like them come and go", it was important to maintain communication after the consultation.

We encouraged people to sign up to our newsletter to keep up to date with what we were doing. The Bolsover Poetry Group continued to keep in touch with us in that way, which enabled us to build our relationship with them and make them aware of opportunities.

Making connections

The Bolsover Poetry Group had previously been on a trip to Chesterfield Library to see poet Matt Black at an event to close his Derbyshire Laureateship.

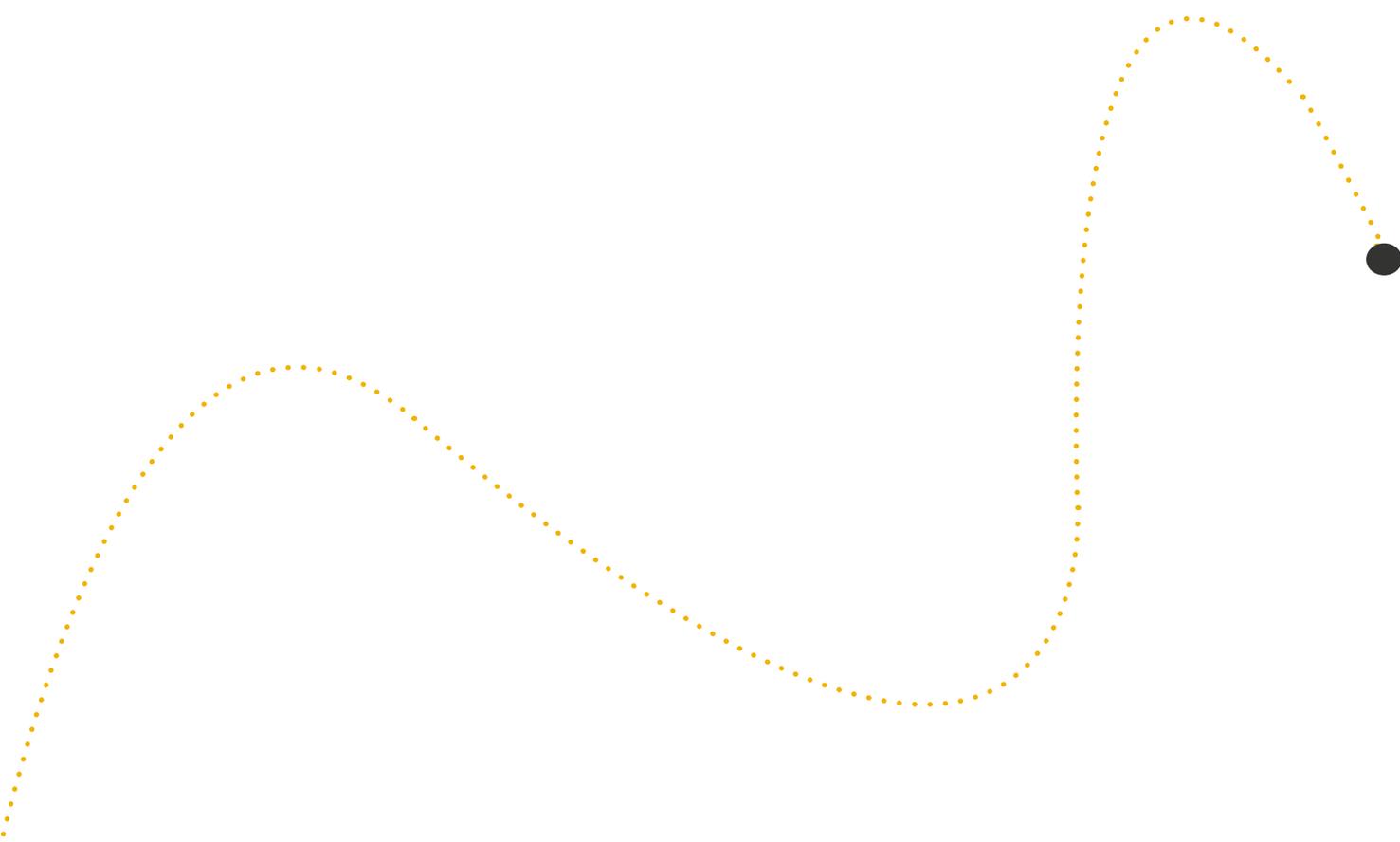
First Art commissioned Matt Black to write poetry inspired by the local area and he performed at the consultation event. That gave members of the poetry group the opportunity to reconnect with him and they also kept in touch.



First Art Community Awards

Following that first consultation, we launched the First Art Community Awards. The award scheme welcomed artists and community organisations to bid for money to deliver projects right at the heart of their communities.

Matt Black encouraged the Bolsover Poetry Group to apply for an award. They did so and in March 2015 they were told that their application for £250 was successful. The funding was to cover fees for Matt to deliver three workshops for them. The workshops provided a safe space for the group to explore new ideas and different styles of poetry. They were a great success and really invigorated the group, giving everyone the confidence to go forwards.



Bolsover Stories — Community Connectors

In October 2015 First Art delivered Bolsover Stories, a two-day event of commissions and performances on the streets and in venues around Bolsover town centre.

We wanted to recruit a group of Community Connectors to work with us on commissioning the artistic content of the programme. Members of the poetry group were keen to get involved again and attended a meeting in which artists and performers for the event were selected using a simple fact finding and voting system.

The group found the experience really valuable and said being involved enabled them to gain insight into how the arts are delivered. It helped them understand how arts organisations and projects are run. They were able to learn about the commissioning process, how much artists cost, how you go about finding and contracting artists and how you programme events.

Not only did the poetry group help to select artists but they also contributed to the programme by organising events themselves. With our support, they planned a poetry evening in Beans Cafe that featured readings by three Derbyshire Poet Laureates: Matt Black, River Wolton and Cathy Grindod. The evening also included readings and performances by the poetry group themselves. This was the first time they had performed in front of an audience and they were daunted by the prospect. Holding the event at Beans gave them confidence as it was on home territory.

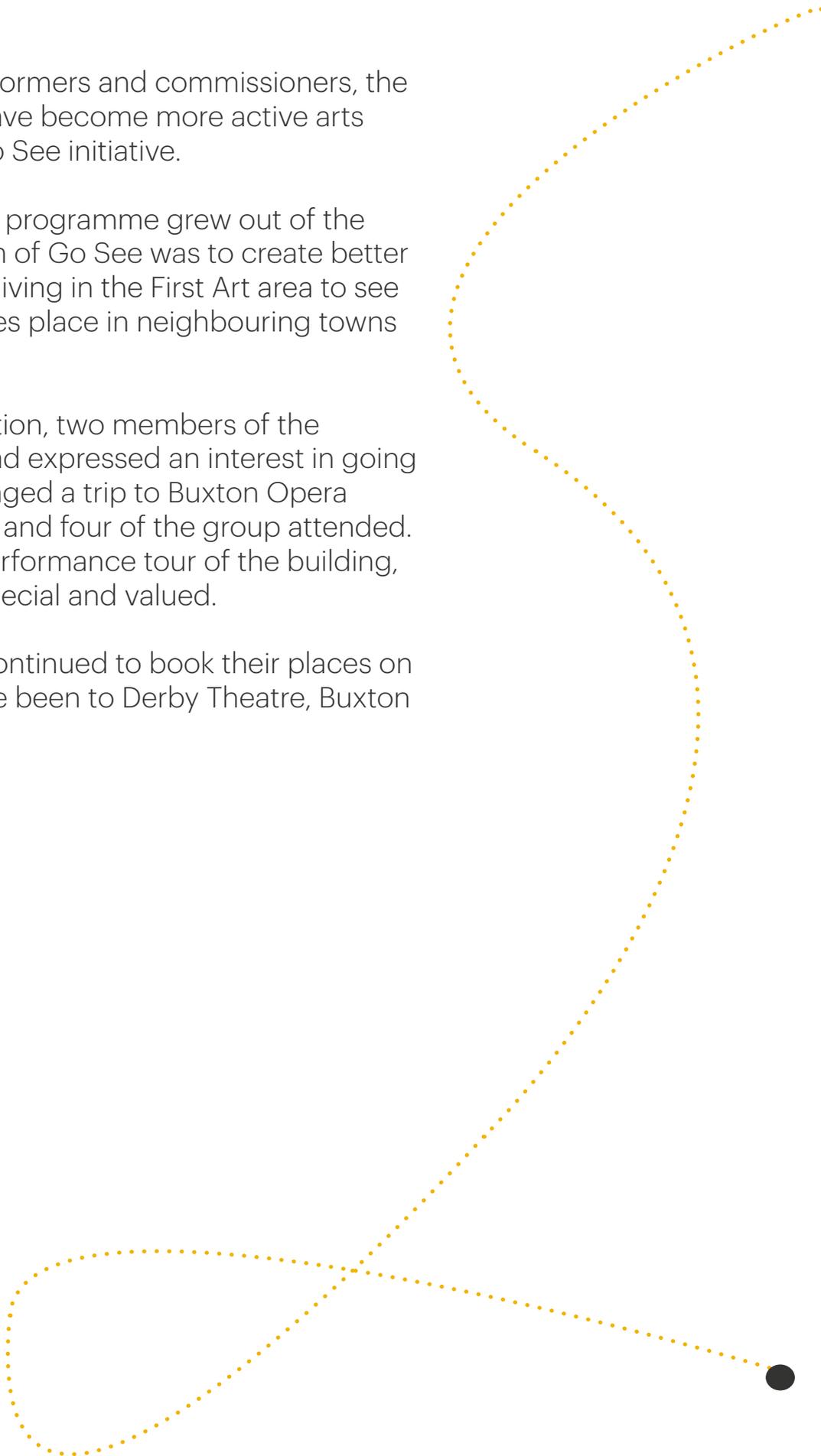
Go Sees

As well as becoming performers and commissioners, the Bolsover Poetry Group have become more active arts attenders through our Go See initiative.

The Go See strand of our programme grew out of the first consultation. The aim of Go See was to create better opportunities for people living in the First Art area to see the work that already takes place in neighbouring towns and cities.

During that first consultation, two members of the Bolsover Poetry Group had expressed an interest in going to see an opera. We arranged a trip to Buxton Opera House to see La Boheme and four of the group attended. They were given a pre-performance tour of the building, which made them feel special and valued.

The poetry group have continued to book their places on the Go See trips and have been to Derby Theatre, Buxton Poetry Evening and Hull.



The engagement circle

By engaging with First Art in a variety of different ways, the Bolsover Poetry Group have grown in confidence and become powerful advocates for the arts.

“We’re more confident as a group and individually.”

“There’s always someone who will inspire you at the poetry group.”

“We’re better poets.”

“I’m passionate about poetry. The group is a safe space.”

After their first performance during the Bolsover Stories Festival, the group has grown in confidence. Things have gone full circle and we now approach them for support, inviting them to perform at our events. They have given poetry readings in local care homes and in May 2017 they recited three poems at the unveiling of a First Art public artwork commission.



Recommendations

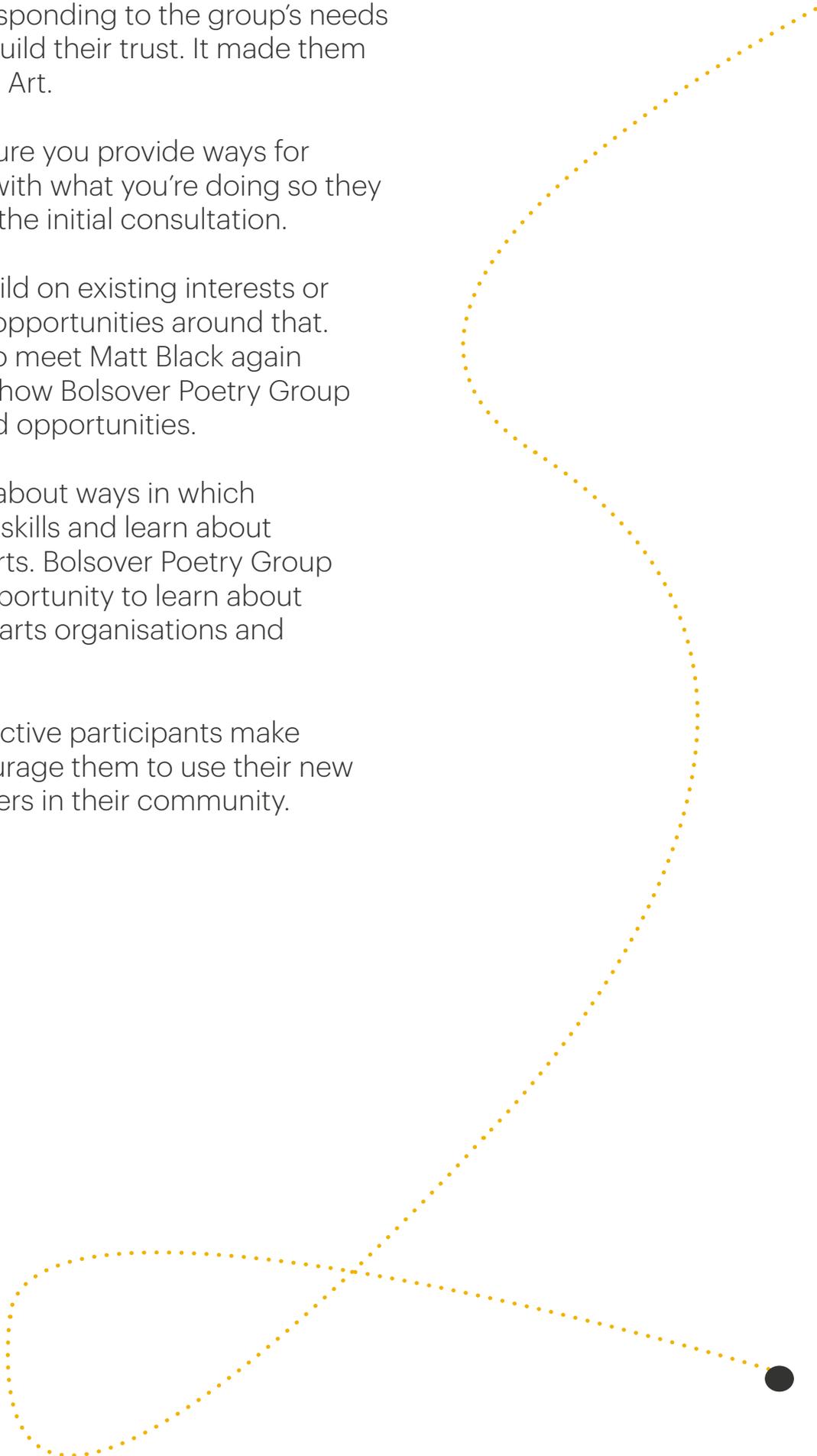
Listen — listening and responding to the group's needs and interests helped us build their trust. It made them want to engage with First Art.

Keep in touch — make sure you provide ways for people to keep in touch with what you're doing so they don't feel forgotten after the initial consultation.

Make connections — build on existing interests or relationships and create opportunities around that. Having the opportunity to meet Matt Black again made a big difference to how Bolsover Poetry Group developed and embraced opportunities.

Build pathways — think about ways in which groups can develop new skills and learn about different aspects of the arts. Bolsover Poetry Group really appreciated the opportunity to learn about commissioning and how arts organisations and projects work.

Complete the circle — active participants make brilliant advocates. Encourage them to use their new experience to inspire others in their community.





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