

Public exposure

Jonathan Goodacre and Heather Stradling get up close and personal with 'the public' and reclaim the term for the arts

The word 'public' is suffering from an image problem. What kind of feelings do phrases like 'the general public' now evoke; something unwashed, anonymous, official and impersonal perhaps?

We tend to blur two concepts that should be distinct. In the UK, 'public' has increasingly come to mean 'provided by government or institution' (like public funding) rather than owned or created by the people (like public spaces). Public art, for example, often now involves a local authority commissioning an 'artist' to produce a sculpture that stands in a shopping centre with little or no input from local people.

It doesn't have to be this way. We should rescue that noble concept of the public which is about participation and democracy, allowing users to bring freshness, honesty and life to our work and organisations. In any case, as arts marketers we should be looking for every opportunity to generate mutual exchange and dialogue rather than one-way communication.

Active consultation provides a framework for the contribution of users. It is a stage on from focus groups or project evaluation and is about ownership as well as opinions. It can show demand, alert us to potential opportunities or problems and help us to communicate on equal terms and in common ways with users.

Consulting 'hard-to-reach' groups

As project managers on a long-term participatory arts project in Southend-on-Sea called *Being Here* we learned the value of taking consultation seriously. The project

involved over 1,300 young people from a variety of 'hard-to-reach' groups taking part in 51 individual projects over five years. It was important to ensure that participants were central to the overall direction and management of the programme and to explore ways in which they could contribute to, monitor and assess processes.

We invited two enthusiastic participants from the early stages of the project onto the programme's management group. They contributed to discussions on overall structure, project development and delivery, influencing decisions as they were made. This brought improvements and supported the participants to develop new experiences and skills. But there was also a need to consult more widely and to listen to different perspectives.

During the next stage, therefore, time and effort were committed to developing consultation sessions for young people, with clear briefs, trained facilitators, and so on. It was planned to form a participants' group, for regular consultation. The set-up was theoretically fine and we were ready to welcome them with open arms. The outcome: hardly anyone turned up and those that did, didn't like the sessions at all.

Peer-to-peer consultation

It may be hard for us to believe, but not everyone is sitting round waiting to be 'consulted' by an enthusiastic arts manager wielding a flip-chart pen. That is not to say, though, that they don't want to be involved. With further research and analysis it became clear that it was not that they didn't want

to be consulted but that *they didn't want to be consulted in that way*.

There are many ways of involving people and asking for their opinions. So, with a revised plan of action, the original participant representatives from the management group visited groups during workshops and integrated discussions into the rest of the activity. An artist worked with the representatives on preparation and planning the questions to be asked. This peer-to-peer dialogue saw a dramatic change in attitudes. Information was collated into a presentation, which was fed back to the management teams.

As well as this more formal approach to consultation, artists made time to involve participants in decisions around the themes, creative activities and artistic products within the different projects. There are a number of interesting initiatives around the UK that have used 'creative consultation' with a range of techniques such as model making, music and digital tools to manage the consultation process.

There were some clear lessons that we learned about consultation:

- develop a policy with aims, objectives and parameters
- clearly identify who, how, what about and when
- don't be tokenistic
- let people know how their views will be used
- make it clear what can be changed or not changed
- be honest and open
- welcome a range of feedback (including 'negative')
- ensure people have enough time and space to feed back

- use more than one consultation method
- don't promise what can't be delivered
- use people who are trained facilitators and use them appropriately
- be wary of people 'representing' an interest group or community
- consider how consultation will be accessible, comfortable and non-intimidatory
- encourage positive creative ideas in addition to feedback on current or planned activity.

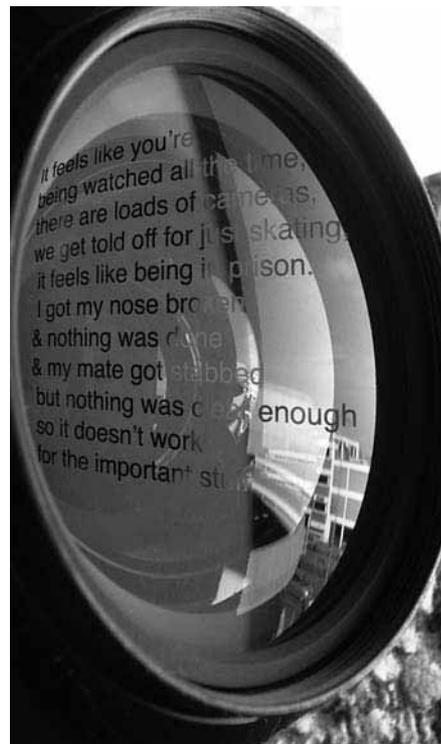
Our consultation process influenced the way that *Being Here* was developed. We had been given priorities from stakeholders of addressing issues such as drugs, hate crime and teenage pregnancy. Through consultation, it became clear that the young people were more concerned with bullying, homelessness, local facilities (and, to some degree, drugs). These themes were then integrated into the programme with a range of artistic methods. The programme was turned around so that it fulfilled the needs of the participants rather than being a top-down tick-box exercise. ■



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1. Participant in performance as part of *Being Here*. Photograph by Ruth Knight.

2. Photograph by Ruth Knight.

3. Artwork by participants from the *Being Here* project, led by artists Bob Clayden and John Row.



e heatherastradling@hotmail.com
e jonathan@gusto.uk.com

HEATHER STRADLING and **JONATHAN GOODACRE** led the Momentum Arts *Being Here* project and are now freelance project managers and consultants. Together with Sarah Bedell, they are authors of *Turning the Tide: Managing a Participatory Arts Regeneration Project*, 2007 (available for £15 from Momentum Arts: info@momentumarts.org.uk).