

Real communities start with real people

Ros Fry advocates strong partnerships and face-to-face dialogue as the keys to developing vital links across communities

I have a secret confession – once I wasn't very bothered about public engagement. My first job was in a museum and though I was passionate about our product I felt the education department was dull and not worth publicising. Later, at the South Bank Centre I was fired up to tell the world about cutting-edge dance, installations or contemporary music but community engagement had me yawning. Yes, we were keen to develop audiences but only so they could support our cool arts activities.

It was only when I had children myself and got involved with real communities with real people (as opposed to arty people dressed in black) that I fully began to understand the enormity of the task. Engaging ordinary people into meaningful dialogue with culture is quite something. Changing attitudes, removing barriers and developing

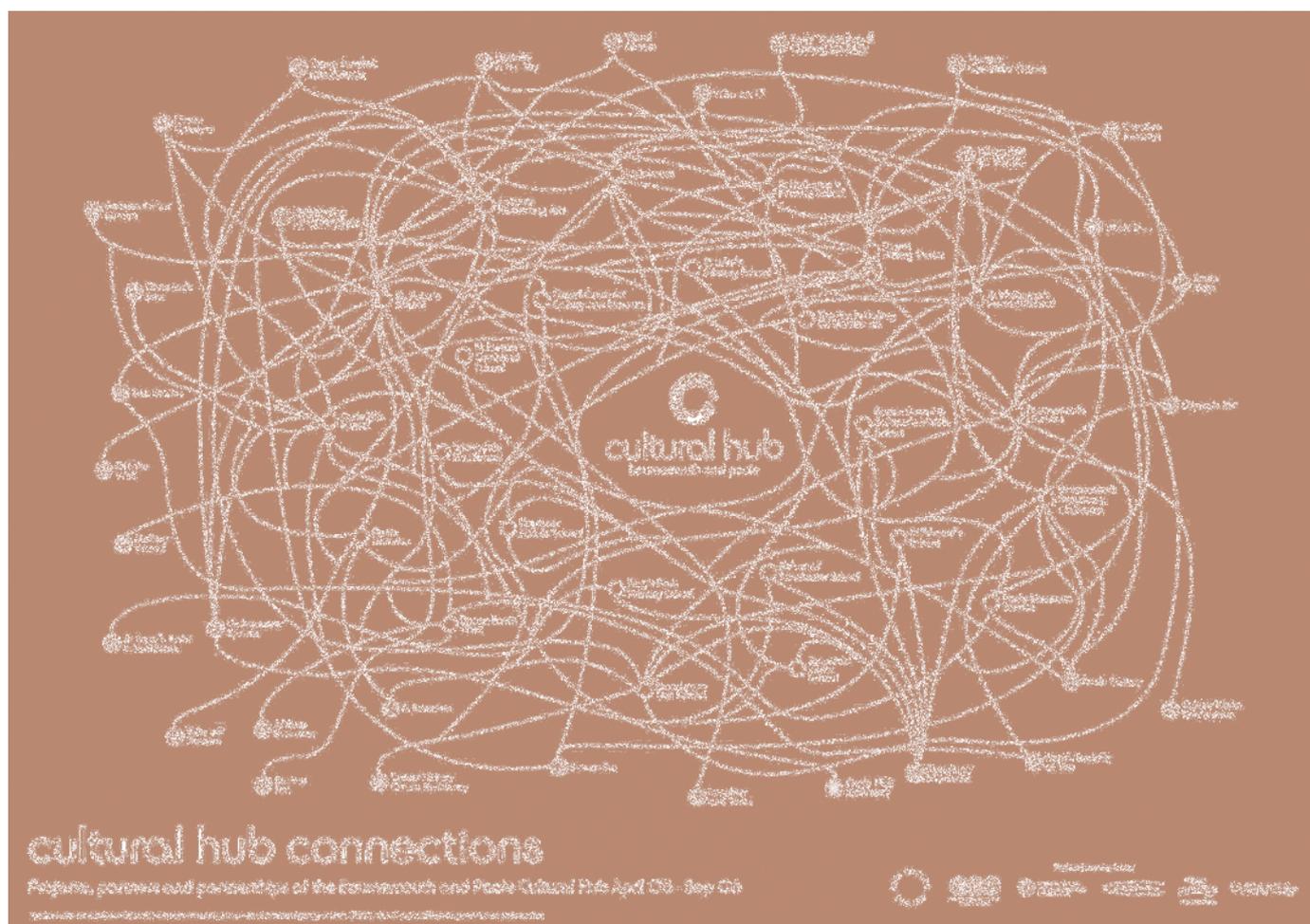
significant cultural links demand time, money and commitment.

An impressive model of audience engagement with children and young people is Bournemouth and Poole's Cultural Hub, a consortium of cultural organisations and schools working together to create inspirational learning opportunities for young people. It is co-ordinated by wave, the local arts education agency and is one of three Cultural Hubs in England, initiated by the Department for Culture Media and Sport, funded by Arts Council England and managed in partnership with the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council. £1.3 million over three years has made a big difference to relationships between the cultural organisations and agencies such as Lighthouse, Poole's Centre for the Arts, Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra – and fourteen schools.

Dozens of projects and schemes have been taking place in the area, all initiated by children, schools and arts organisations working in total partnership. Many have brought artists or performers into schools to create work or develop skills. Others have brought children and young people into cultural organisations to experience, participate in or promote events. All have involved major shifts in attitude and systems on both sides. Teachers have had to accommodate challenging artistic demands while cultural organisations learn to be more flexible and welcoming and, in some cases, to completely hand over decision making to young people or children.

Every proposed Cultural Hub project is presented at monthly partner meetings. The lead teacher, child, librarian, arts manager or artist outlines their idea and then, in small groups, they debate which schemes they will recommend to be funded.





There are always more projects proposed than money available but the openness of decision making inhibits peevishness. If only arts council funding decisions could be so easy! Teachers and children are more incisive than those of us working in cultural organisations. They ask awkward questions and are not ashamed to admit when they don't know something or someone. The curators, librarians, arts officers and programmers representing the cultural organisations have moved a long way towards them. The two sides are relaxed with each other, more able to understand their very different situations.

One of the most dynamic partners is The Study Gallery of Modern Art, Poole where curator Sandy Wilderspin is dedicated to engaging with hard-to-reach communities. All of their Cultural Hub projects seek out non-gallery-goers by inviting them to join in with the gallery's programme via quirky projects which make engaging with contemporary art virtually pain free! One current Hub project involved primary school children making art

books about their nearby shops and shop owners (featuring pie crusts, ears and golf courses). Another will involve every page 44 being removed from thousands of local charity shop paperbacks and replaced with a gallery invite!

One of the most successful initiatives is www.hubalicious.org, a young people's website for arts, culture and information on careers in the cultural sector, created every Wednesday evening by 15–17 year olds visiting the gallery. The teenagers are paid to design, commission and create the website. When I went to interview them, they ended up interviewing me!

Face-to-face dialogue is the most effective way to engage with the public, whether it's the world of young people, education, different races, income groups or abilities. Newsletters, promo packs, social networking websites and text programmes are great but they need to be designed alongside the target group and fully supported by personal, word-of-mouth communication.

After a decade of visiting schools as a parent and arts governor I finally understand the different way that they work. And I won't be sending trees of leaflets to market events. ●



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 (includes evaluation of the first year of Cultural Hub by Hayton Associates)