

Local Trust | Big Local



Creating the future

Art, communities and change

Maddy Costa



About the author

Maddy Costa is interested in art and particularly theatre as a place of gathering and community. She has been an arts writer and editor for The Guardian and, as a researcher, contributed to the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation's Inquiry into the Civic Role of the Arts. Maddy now works primarily online and within theatre, often in collaboration with other writers and artists.

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Registered in England and Wales

Big Local Trust charity number 1145916

Local Trust company number 7833396

and charity number 1147511

Big Local is managed by Local Trust and funded by the The National Lottery Community Fund.

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ISBN 978-1-9998292-5-4

Published: April 2019.

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FOREWORD

BIG LOCAL IS ONE OF THE MOST RADICAL and innovative grant programme ever launched by a major Lottery funder. Between 2010-12 The National Lottery Community Fund identified 150 areas that had historically ‘missed out’ on lottery and other funding. Each of those areas was allocated £1m of Big Local funding. This could be spent in any way they chose, provided local residents organised themselves locally to plan and manage that funding, involving the wider community in that decision-making process.

Beyond that, the rules, constraints and priorities that define Big Local have been for local people to decide. By design, the programme is bottom-up and community led; there are no top-down targets or centrally-imposed delivery models. The timeframe for Big Local extends over 15 years, allowing communities to take their time, build confidence and skills, make decisions and deliver change without the usual pressures to meet end-of-year spend targets or other arbitrary bureaucratic deadlines.

The activities and initiatives Big Local areas have chosen to support reflect the diversity of the communities

themselves, they include everything from building affordable homes to tackling antisocial behaviour; creating or preserving community facilities, parks and sports centres; launching new training and employment schemes; tackling local health and environmental issues; addressing community cohesion. Most importantly, through their initiatives, residents of Big Local areas have collectively developed the skills, networks and confidence to continue to lead their areas into the future.

One of the exciting aspects of Big Local is the extent to which communities are choosing to use creativity as a route towards achieving their ambitions. This isn't just about great new public art or local craft evenings (although there are a lot of both in Big Local). What we are also seeing across the entire programme are compelling examples of how creativity is providing ways for communities to imagine new realities and find solutions to old and previously intractable problems.

Local Trust was therefore delighted to commission Maddy Costa to visit Big Local areas in Ramsgate, Liverpool, Eastbourne and Lincolnshire, looking at the unique ways in which they are each using arts and creativity to transform their neighbourhoods.

It is something we are exploring further in our Creative Civic Change programme – a new grant fund running alongside Big Local – that is supporting 16 communities across England to tackle issues such as isolation, youth violence and community cohesion through creative methods. Although this is still in its early stages, we are already seeing evidence at a local level of how powerful this approach can be.

‘Creating the future: art, communities and change’ is the latest essay in a series in which we have invited writers, thinkers and researchers to reflect on the experience of Big Local areas, and the lessons they may provide for wider policy debates about place and community.

David Boyle's essay 'The grammar of change', the first in the series, highlighted the transformative potential that can be released by the transfer of power, resources and responsibility to local people. Dan Gregory's 'Skittled out', explored the importance of social infrastructure to the sustainability of communities. Hazel Sheffield's essay 'Building wealth' drew attention to the work communities are taking forward to transform local economies. We hope 'Creating the future: art, communities and change' provides a similarly important contribution to another critical public debate.

Matt Leach
Chief executive
Local Trust





Chapter One

Creative minds

IT'S A BUSY TUESDAY MORNING in the community rooms of Sir John Mason House, a rehabilitation and respite home cradled within the Grangefield estate in the Big Local area of Winterton. Babies and toddlers are bumbling cheerfully about the floor while a group of women, ranging in age from late-teens to 50s and above, chat, paint and make seasonal decorations. This is the coffee morning set up by Grangefield resident Lisa Hall and her mum in 2017; Lisa wanted it to be a creative space, and so bought two large boxes of art materials with support from Winterton's Big Local. When I ask her why art matters, she says it's because creativity is everywhere: "Even if you're a shop assistant, you need to know how to be creative with decorating the shop. In any job, there's some sort of creativeness that you need to have." Being "good" at art isn't what's important to her: it's having "a creative mind".

"Before Samantha Voak became chair of the Big Local group in Newington, Ramsgate, she didn't think of herself as an "arty" person at all. "I literally thought art was just pen and paper and painting," she admits, and, because of that,

assumed she had no talent for it. But the multitude of creative activities that have been happening in her community through Big Local have transformed that, encouraging her to see art in more cultural terms: “It could be cooking, it could be singing, it could be dancing. There’s so much more to art.” And while taking part in these activities has changed her impression of art on the outside, she’s also been transformed on the inside. Through being creative, she says, “You find out something about yourself that you never knew you had.”

Creative times

Something extraordinary has been happening in the UK in the past few years: a surge in visibility of community and participatory arts that once existed only on the sidelines. One catalyst for this was Isles of Wonder, the 2012 Summer Olympics opening ceremony shaped by film-maker and theatre director Danny Boyle. Here was a gorgeous, inventive, vibrant celebration of British life, and particularly British cultural life, involving some 800 volunteers among the professional crew and a cast of thousands, amassing to make it together. Alan Lane, who directs large-scale community theatre with his Leeds-based company, Slung Low, believes the event heralded a new understanding: “That you can place participation and a lot of the language of community theatre at the heart of big national moments and that isn’t crap, that isn’t naff—that’s good.”¹

A snapshot of the years that followed is remarkable in its range of activity. In 2013, Arts Council England established the Creative People and Places project, supporting selected local communities to expand their creative engagement.

¹ Quoted in <http://exeuntmagazine.com/features/peoples-theatre-brighton/>

In 2014, an organisation called 53 Million Artists began. Dedicated to proving that “everyone is creative, and when we use our creativity we can make positive change in our lives and the world around us”², they quickly decided they had underestimated their reach and changed their name to 64 Million Artists, more closely to reflect the population of the UK. That same year saw the beginning of the Fun Palaces movement, which annually sees a proliferation of community-led festivals of arts and sciences. In 2015, the BBC joined forces with a number of partners to shape Get Creative, again to inspire everyday creativity. Around these movements we’ve seen community groups small and large take the stage at the most prestigious venues in the country, including the Royal Opera House and the National Theatre in London, earning rapturous reviews in national newspapers.

That snapshot folds together several kinds of creative activity: participatory work that is led by artists and arts organisations; community arts that might be led by an artist or might be led by the community itself; and the everyday creativity people engage in as part of the fabric of life. But it builds up to a single picture: of a country remembering that art is integral to human existence.

Creative beings

Evidence exists of artistic activity dating back millennia. Hidden away in caves across the world, from Chauvet in southern France to the jungle of Borneo, are paintings of animals and other characterful illustrative marks made 30,000 years ago

² Quoted in <https://64millionartists.com/about/>

and more. Within the Big Local area of Elmton, Creswell and Hodthorpe sits Creswell Crag, the site of some of the oldest art made in the British Isles, including drawings and symbols carved into the rock walls, and bones engraved with images of humans and animals, at least 10,000 years old. It's not always clear to archaeologists whether the art they find was symbolic, decorative or used for communication. What is certain is that humans are creative beings, and that art has always had a role to play in our lives.

And yet, art is also seen as a specialist activity. This is why so many people today, like Lisa Hall and Samantha Voak, don't see themselves as "arty". Worse, it can be seen as an unnecessary luxury. David Burnby, who is the Big Local Rep for Winterton, supporting the community and offering advice on behalf of Local Trust, acknowledges this when he says, "In a poor working-class area, your immediate priority is how are you going to stay out of debt, how are you going to feed your kids and how are you going to get a job. That's the stark reality. So you start talking about the arts, and people just think that's something that other people do somewhere else."

Francois Matarasso, who has been documenting and championing community and participatory arts since the 1990s, traces the idea that art is done by other people back to "the Enlightenment and Romantic belief that art is a matter of being rather than doing." The belief that artists are particular people with unmatched skills, he adds, "has become so ingrained that it can be difficult to see otherwise."³

Community and participatory art, however, offers another view. Matt Peacock, who founded Streetwise Opera in 2002 to give people experiencing homelessness access to creative activity, understands that art might seem trivial when people

³ Francois Matarasso, *A Restless Art* (Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2019), p49

are in need of shelter and food, but argues: “Participating in the arts can rebuild people’s pride and purpose, [and] give them confidence to face other challenges in their lives.”⁴

Creative challenge

The surge in visibility of community and participatory arts has happened at the same time as significant financial challenges for the creative industries. The climate of austerity has resulted in substantial cuts to arts subsidy. Some have been direct: in 2010, Arts Council England received a 30% cut in funding, of which 15% was passed directly to arts organisations themselves. And some have been indirect: in the same year, a 26% reduction was made to local government expenditure; as a result, arts funding fell over the next five years by 16.6% overall, and in some areas by significantly more.⁵ Such cuts force art into a kind of competition with other social essentials such as education and healthcare—and inevitably make art seem less important than it is.

At the same time, there’s been a rise in research into the benefits of art to individuals and society as a whole. The report by the Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Value, published in 2015, for instance, argued that studying art doesn’t just make people better artists, but also better scientists and engineers. The AHRC Cultural Value Project, published in 2016, meanwhile, found that engaging with art can encourage people to volunteer more, vote, and have more appreciation for the diversity of human experience. And, in 2017, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation published the

⁴ From a Royal Opera House blog post published in 2014: <https://www.roh.org.uk/news/the-arts-give-us-dignity>

⁵ More details in *Funding Arts and Culture in a Time of Austerity*, a report by Adrian Harvey, published by the New Local Government Network and Arts Council England, April 2016

report Rethinking Relationships, based on the first phase of its ongoing Inquiry into the Civic Role of the Arts.⁶ That research (of which I was a part) focused on arts organisations who place “people and local communities at the heart of their practice... facilitating and enabling them to pursue their interests and needs”, understanding that this simultaneously improves the organisation itself and the community it sits within.

Creative communities

This essay tells the story of four Big Local areas in particular: Clubmoor in Liverpool; Newington in Ramsgate; Winterton, near Scunthorpe; and Devonshire West in Eastbourne. Each place is taking a distinct approach to community-led art and everyday creativity: Newington and Winterton is collaborating with artists in different ways, Devonshire West sees art as a route to economic regeneration, while Clubmoor puts creativity at the heart of all its problem-solving. Whatever the approach, this activity speaks directly to the ethos of Big Local, that residents make the choices about what to do to improve their area, how to do it, and how to make those improvements sustainable long term. In the final chapter, I'll look ahead to the next decade, and what society at large could learn from Big Local's relationship with art and creativity.

⁶ The report and executive summary can be accessed here: <https://civicroleartsinquiry.gulbenkian.org.uk/resources/rethinking-relationships-phase-one-of-the-inquiry-into-the-civic-role-of-arts-organisations>





Chapter Two

Clubmoor

THE BOUNDARIES OF THE CLUBMOOR WARD in Liverpool have shifted so much over time that many residents, on hearing the news that it had been awarded a Big Local million, were surprised to discover they lived there. Bob Bowen, chair of the My Clubmoor board as of January 2019, laughs to think that he's occupied the same house for 42 years, and for 35 of those it was in Norris Green. But Daniel Ryder, another local in charge of the group's marketing and communications, has found some people "get a bit tetchy" at the suggestion, insisting they live in neighbouring Anfield, famed as the home of Liverpool Football Club.

In the early days of Big Local, some 1800 residents were interviewed on the street, and although the trained volunteers used "an appreciative framework" designed to draw out "what you love about the place", the reflex responses were anything but positive. "It wasn't so much what was said," explains Kevin Peacock, My Clubmoor's outgoing chair when I visit in December 2018, "but the kind of negativity." Extended conversation revealed that most people had quite a good life: they have their family close by, they've not been affected by

crime. And yet, asked what was great about the area, they'd immediately say: "Nothing, it's all shite."

Part of the problem, Kevin believes, might be a lack of access to creative opportunities. He's noticed over the years that what people do for a living is rarely the thing they say they love doing—and what they love doing is invariably creative. "In one way you think, why aren't you doing the thing you love? And the answer is, because there isn't an outlet for it." And so My Clubmoor set out to "give people a platform, a space where they can come and exercise their creativity."

Creative engagement

Before My Clubmoor could be understood as a platform for everyday creativity, however, it had to address the problem of Clubmoor's identity. First the Big Local group worked with a professional designer to create a unifying brand: a bright, cheerful logo that would be instantly recognisable. Next, in December 2013, they began publishing their own newspaper, written by local residents who relished the opportunity to tell their own stories, and delivered by hand to all 8000 homes in the area. "We thought it would be a good way of getting the My Clubmoor brand out there," says Nicola Williams, a board member from the beginning. "We wanted it to be positive stories of people in the My Clubmoor area, board members and people we'd had some interaction with. And we wanted to use it as a way of getting other people involved."

Published roughly twice a year, the newspapers can be read online and give an impressive sense of the ways in which My Clubmoor has made creative thinking the bedrock of all its activities. "We didn't want to replicate anything that already happened," explains Nicola. "It's easy to do a party or a fair,



but we found that doing the more creative engagement has been a way of getting more people involved.” The annual dog show, established in summer 2014, is a prime example: no-one complaining about dog mess in the area “expected us to do our own mini-Crufts,” says Nicola. “It sounds mad that doing a dog show can change that, but responsible ownership has changed massively.”

Something that’s not entirely clear reading the early newspapers is which activities were run by Big Local, and which might have happened under other auspices. Paul Rotheram, also a board member from the beginning, says this was My Clubmoor’s second identity problem: the group felt “lost in St Andrew’s Church”. The local church had been supporting My Clubmoor in a number of ways, not least as a temporary home; but it already had its own vibrant community and volunteer network, offering financial support, a food bank and plenty of events. The Big Local group knew they needed a home of their own, but found commercial property rates to be prohibitive.

Change came via Gordon Dinn, a Clubmoor resident who was given £4,900 by Big Local to set up his own business, transforming wooden pallets into striking new sculptural and practical designs. Gordon found out that his local shopkeeper had bought a former builders’ yard less than ten minutes’ walk from St Andrew’s Church, and didn’t mind who occupied it as long as it didn’t become a rival mini-supermarket. That property is now leased to the Big Local group for a minimal sum, and in the early half of 2018, residents worked together to transform it into their community hub—in the process, allowing My Clubmoor itself, says Paul, to turn “from a chrysalis to a butterfly”.

Not for us, but for you

Although only half-finished on the day I visit—the front room is fully renovated, the back room still a brick-walled shell—the hub is light and flexible, small enough to be intimate, but big enough to hold everything from yoga classes to a cookery club. “I worked a lot with the builders and contractors,” says Daniel, “so the feel of the place is more modern and arty than your bog-standard community centre.” It also houses two distinctive creations by Gordon: the Wishing Tree, a place for visitors to hang notes saying what they’d like My Clubmoor to do next (among the suggestions are “dance classes”, “more clubs for children” and, delightfully, “an ice-cream parlour”); and the Reading Throne, a large bench with built-in bookshelves that acts as a portable library.

Anyone in the community is invited to lead an activity. “We give people chances,” says Nicola. “One of the ladies who comes to the reading group is now doing line dancing here. If she did that through the council there’d be lots of hoops to jump through.” The reading group has also led to a creative writing group. That shift—from responding to others to being creative yourself—is reflected in how the volunteering structure has changed in My Clubmoor, says Kevin. “We’ve switched from people doing what we need them to do, to us helping them to do what they want to do.” And nowhere is the benefit of this more clear than in the story of Daniel himself.

When I ask Bob what the notable successes of Big Local have been so far, his immediate answer is: “Watching Daniel grow.” Daniel arrived as a callow 18-year-old, already disillusioned by the “crappy jobs” he’d been in and out of since leaving school and looking for something more meaningful. In response, the Big Local group created a

bespoke apprenticeship for him, which Nicola says, “met his interests and qualities and built on that.” Daniel learned how to interview people in the community and in the arts sector across Liverpool, how to document events using photography and social media, and how to turn his own interests into activities for the entire community, for instance, offering drum lessons to local children. Now aged 22 and graduated from his apprenticeship, he’s integral to the team, helping to programme, run, market and evaluate events.

A laboratory for the future

Daniel works alongside John Maguire, a playwright who took on community engagement duties at My Clubmoor in early 2018. Their “creative partnership” is galvanised by their respective strengths: John’s with words, Daniel’s with images. Both are resourceful magpies: if a creative idea has worked elsewhere, says Daniel, “why not try it in Clubmoor?” And so the Reading Throne is based on the Big Little Library project John had been involved in elsewhere in Liverpool, while Daniel was inspired to begin photographing local people by Humans of New York, a successful photoblog by Brandon Stanton. The hub’s shutters, emblazoned with the words “Come together” in zingy colours, were painted by a local artist who won a national competition that Daniel set up after admiring the graffitied shutters in Liverpool’s County Road.

The community hub is “a laboratory”, says Daniel. “We try out our experiments here”. The plan now is to scale some of them up. Daniel wants to talk to shopkeepers opposite the hub about getting their shutters painted too: “I’d love to turn this into its own arty street.” Paul, who has been coordinating an allotments festival, now wants to work with Daniel on a music

festival, bringing food and music together. This, too, will start in the hub, says Daniel: “We want to do open mic nights for a few weeks, and once we get that bank of musicians that are confident to play, we can get them to play at the music festival.” John has started applying for arts-based grants, through which he’s been able to stage intergenerational activities in the hub; he’s also started programming theatre performances in the area, with a view to setting up a community theatre group.

My Clubmoor’s expanding ambition is reflected in the most recent issue of the newspaper, which has a different feel to the previous nine publications. Across its pages are four major case-studies of other community-led activity in Liverpool, and nuggets of information about Tate Liverpool, Bluecoat, FACT, Open Eye Gallery and other major arts organisations in the city that Daniel interviewed during his apprenticeship and with whom the Big Local group hope to collaborate in future.

Whatever partnerships are forged, says John, “The most important thing has been getting people to express their own creativity. It feels like an antidote to pessimism and gloominess—because what’s the opposite to everything is shite? It’s creativity.” And Daniel sees himself as living proof of the benefits. “I did not care in the slightest about where I lived or my community before I got this job. But if you empower someone in something they’re passionate about, they’re going to grab it and do it.”



Chapter Three

Newington

TUCKED BEHIND RAMSGATE STATION, with its back turned to the coast, Newington has little to attract a visitor. Cara Thorpe, community development worker for the estate's Big Local group, and Samantha Voak, its chair, both remember there being a fish-and-chip shop here once, plus a pub, a greengrocer, and a butcher so good that customers came from all over Ramsgate. Now all that's left are a Spar, the anonymous-looking grey community centre in which we sit, and a dismal reputation for burnt-out cars, anti-social behaviour and endless trouble with the police. "Don't get me wrong, we've deserved that reputation in the past and then some," says Cara. "But Newington has changed."

The estate already had an active residents' group when it joined Big Local in 2013, and Cara says one of its goals has been to get "outsiders coming in. We wanted them to see that we haven't got two heads, we are just normal people and actually it's really nice in Newington." Nova Marshall, an artist who lives in Margate, is one of those outsiders. She's been working here since 2015, although what she's been doing isn't exactly visible. "If you took a walk around, you'd see the art shelter, some nice

boards and some nice spaces,” she says, “but it doesn’t tell you anything. The art is present in the people.”

The art of kindness

Nova came to Newington via People United, an arts charity based in Canterbury that specialises in working with communities over extended periods of time, supporting them to begin a relationship with art that might transform them from within. And People United came via Newington’s Big Local Rep, Carl Adams, who supports the group and offers advice on behalf of Local Trust. Carl had come across a previous project by People United called We All Do Good Things, which took place in nearby Herne Bay: art was used to encourage residents to share positive stories of generous acts, culminating in a Giant Picnic, which has since become an annual event. All this impressed Carl more than anything he’d seen at, say, the Turner Contemporary gallery in Margate, where he grew up. “I know regenerating around the arts is good economically, it generates money, but any time I went to anything like the Turner, or the stuff that goes on in Folkestone around the Triennial, it didn’t speak to me,” he says. Whereas People United’s work “speaks to me about art.”

The Big Local group were already creating community events, for instance to celebrate Easter and Halloween, and to attract visitors to the Copse, a 1.2-acre woodland area acquired from Kent County Council as a community asset. But they were keen to be more ambitious, and invited the founder of People United, Tom Andrews, to tell them more about his approach. Like Carl, they were impressed. “They don’t do things to the residents, they do things with the residents,” says Cara. “So we decided to work with them.”

Together they shaped a project for Newington called The Best of Us, and People United hired Nova to help them deliver it. In April 2015 people young and old across the community were invited to become “creative champions”; this group then devised, and encouraged others to attend, Newington’s first festival, Best Fest, which took place in October of that year. “We liked the idea of having some sort of arts festival in which all the community could come together and celebrate,” say Cara. The Best of Us has happened every year since and emphasises interaction: visitors might find themselves planting herbs to take home or building a model of Newington from cardboard boxes.

Working with People United has encouraged the community to see that “art is quite broad—it could be food and cooking, it could be dance and song, or writing poems or painting or making stuff,” says Cara. And art is a conduit to something much bigger, says Nova: the creative champions get people talking and thinking about “courage, compassion, kindness, and what community means to them.”

Artists in different ways

Words like kindness and compassion can seem fluffy, but initially Nova’s relationship with Newington Big Local was anything but. “I thought she was a snob,” Sarah Nicholson, a volunteer with the group, says cheerfully. Nova understands the scepticism: “They think I’m some do-gooder coming to teach them all these wonderful things that they don’t know and it’s not about that. My practice as an artist is about collaboration, co-production and co-authorship. You’re not coming in to tell people what art is, you’re coming in to expose them to different kinds of art and from that they create their

own from their own experience. I think we're all artists, just in lots of different ways.

With Nova's support, the Big Local community has grown in confidence, putting creativity at the heart of all their events and joining in with national projects such as The Big Draw. Art in the Copse in 2018 brought in another outsider, artist Rob Turner, who helped residents to make a large-scale, hand-drawn map of the woodland. Often artist and residents alike don't know exactly what they'll be making when they start: a hallmark of the best community art, according to Francois Matarasso, an expert on the subject.¹ For instance, Cara remembers working on the "kindness tapestry", which began with members of the community filling in cardboard discs with descriptions of acts of generosity. The discs sat in jars, like cookies, until Nova suggested weaving them together with plastic ribbons. Hung outdoors during Best Fest, the tapestry looked spectacular and became "a talking point for people to share something really positive," says Nova. "People were able to say: I was part of a much bigger thing."

The residents are also able to tell a different story about themselves. "I can't draw, I can't sing, I seriously can't dance unless I've had a few," says Cara. "I don't see myself as good at art because at school teachers told me my art was appalling." And yet she really enjoyed the weaving—"to me it was therapeutic—and appreciates anew the creativity of the craft activities she used to do with her kids. Sarah claims to be "not arty in any way, shape or form", but she enjoyed contributing to the map of the copse, and Cara says she's "great with cakes and making them look pretty." Tammy Sains was so admired by the community for the way

¹ Francois Matarasso, *A Restless Art* (Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2019), p51

she decorated her house at Halloween—“most of the kids ran away screaming”—that she’s been made the Big Local events manager. Her Halloween in the Copse in 2017 was so frightening, Cara says gleefully, “a grown woman wet herself and had to go home and change.” Simone Crouchman, another volunteer, works with recycled wood and industrial waste to make outdoor sculptures. She’s filled the copse with extraordinary objects, including an articulated robot made from wooden pallets, and copper piping wind chimes, but it’s only “looking back I think: that is actually art.”

Expanding horizons

Each small revelation helps explain why the group have been so keen for Nova to continue with them: her ongoing work is partly funded by Big Local, but also by additional grants from charities and Arts Council England. The main project they’re collaborating on now is the Chill Club, a weekly session for 10-18-year-olds. Nova provides art equipment, choosing “quality materials—some of them don’t have access to any kind of drawing materials at home, so that makes all the difference.” Participants are invited to suggest activities, because, Nova believes, it’s “so empowering” when they see others engage in their ideas. Anything the Newington adults can’t lead themselves—such as street-dance sessions, or rap workshops—she invites other artists to lead, which has the added bonus of demonstrating some of the creative careers it’s possible to pursue as an adult. Simone points out that many children have parents who “have rarely worked, so they assume a career is not for them.” Unemployment here is “generational”, Nova adds, “so it’s about aspirations.”

Horizons are further widened by outings beyond the community centre, including to Turner Contemporary, the

theatre in Margate, and even Tate Exchange in London, where Chill Club kids joined in with a People United project. Inspired, some of the older teenagers have started to visit the Turner themselves. “Just through showing them the entrance, showing them how they interact in those spaces, it gave them permission that it can be their space too,” Nova marvels. “And when they’ve done that,” notes Samantha, “they think, where can I go next?”

The Newington adults have learned a lot about the children through Chill Club: when absorbed in creative activities, says Samantha, they’re more likely to discuss difficulties at home. Nova recognises aspects of herself in their stories. “Some of my childhood was very chaotic. It makes you aware of what they possibly could be going through. I found refuge in art so I know the difference it can make in young people.” She’s also discovered that the stigma of living in Newington begins to strike when the kids reach secondary school, and believes being creative will help the young people “develop self-esteem, so they start to think more positively about who they are and what they can achieve, not carrying these labels that people put upon them.” Kids often respond to her suggestions with the words, “I can’t do this”, because that’s the perception implanted in them. “We reverse it, saying, you can.”

The same self-belief is building up within the adults too. And Simone is clear why. “Art makes us better people,” she says. “It takes us out of the darkness into the light.”





Chapter Four

Winterton

AT THE HEART OF WINTERTON is an elegant mural depicting the placid town: its buildings periwinkle blue above a pear-green ground; silhouette figures fishing, dancing and playing football across it. The image blurs the town's busy past with its sleepier present and hoped-for future. Robin Shawyer, member of the Big Local residents committee Winterton 2022, with a keen interest in local heritage, says there was a time when this was the “principal market town” in the area south of the Humber. “But when the steelworks started, everything drifted to Scunthorpe, shops included.”

Winterton typifies a problem experienced across England: the collapse of the small, local high street, whether due to competition from nearby cities, peripheral shopping malls, or the ease of buying online. Rowan Moore, architecture critic for the Observer, sees this as an existential crisis, affecting “the identity and self-esteem of entire towns and city districts... what, for example, is a ‘market town’ if it doesn’t have a market?”¹ But according to Robin, who moved here in the late-

¹ From an essay published by the Observer in 2018
<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/dec/01/everything-must-go-what-next-for-the-high-street-new-retail-empty-shops>

1980s, Winterton residents are quite unruffled by their home's fall in status. Whenever there's a public consultation—and this includes any related to Big Local—the result is the same: “Most people quite like Winterton the way it is.”

One community

It might be a place of quiet contentment, but Winterton is also a place of subtle division. To the west of the town sits the Grangefield estate; built in 1965, it's always had “a bit of a stigma” attached to it. So says Dean Cockerill, chair of Winterton 2022, who was a year old when his family moved here. It's because Grangefield is deemed “an area of social deprivation” that Winterton was awarded the Big Local million—but “one of the stipulations was that money was given to the whole village.” Grangefield has its own, active residents' committee, chaired by Lisa Hall, who introduced this essay. Focused on change in their neighbourhood, they've been reluctant to join Winterton 2022 in addition. This makes Dean “the only committee member who's actually lived on the estate.”

Keen to unite the town into “one community”, Winterton 2022 see art as their social glue. In 2018, the residents organised a sculpture trail, placing 21 fibreglass tractors in gardens and public spaces across Winterton, each one vibrantly decorated by a different local group, including the Agricultural Society, the Brownies, the Disabled Club, the Town Council and the Grangefield Residents Committee. Local artists ran workshops in each of the schools to help the children decorate five fibreglass owls, which were also part of the trail. Over the summer, residents were encouraged to visit each other's sculptures; at the end, most of the tractors were

auctioned to raise money for the town, but you can still find three dotted about, beaming in their permanent posts.”

The event was inspired by the success of the Larkin With Toads sculpture trail in Hull, which filled the city with 40 artist-designed, business-sponsored, fibreglass toads in 2010. By adapting the idea and putting residents rather than artists at the heart of the design process, Winterton 2022 hoped to “spark interest in the community, give the community something to talk about,” says Robin. Initially, that backfired, Dean admits. “We got quite a lot of criticism in the early days—people couldn’t see the worth of it. However, at the end we got a lot of really positive comments about how good it was.”

From eyesore to icon

The history of Antony Gormley’s iconic Angel of the North tells a similar story: local papers in Newcastle and Gateshead ran fierce campaigns against the idea of it, reflecting the local mood—but that quickly changed when the monumental sculpture appeared within the landscape. It’s now celebrated by Gateshead council as “the catalyst for the cultural regeneration of Gateshead Quays that led to the Gateshead Millennium Bridge, BALTIC and Sage.”²

As well as uniting the community, the sculpture trail was designed to attract visitors to Winterton, and Robin names the Angel of the North when he talks about the role public art can play in “improving the built environment, being a talking point, being an advert, being a legacy.” Dean, meanwhile, talks admiringly of the public sculpture he encounters in other

² From the Gateshead Council website <https://www.gateshead.gov.uk/article/5303/The-history-of-the-Angel-of-the-North>

European cities when on holiday with his wife. Both men take the view that if other places can entice cultural visitors this way, why can't Winterton?

At the same time as plans for the tractor trail were devised, Winterton 2022 proposed commissioning two permanent sculptures for the town. Residents were invited to choose the design for the first, which is already in situ: a filigree sycamore seed, constructed from dove-grey metal, which stands in Winterton cemetery. The second will commemorate astronomer Wallace Sargent, who grew up in Winterton, and became an eminent professor at the Californian Institute of Technology. That sculpture is now being crafted by local artist Michael Scrimshaw, and the plan is to position it at the heart of Winterton, where Robin hopes it might "raise aspiration" among its young people.

Dean would happily "continue doing sculptures and statues around the town because that's my interest." But he's worried his passion isn't shared, that the Big Local million will come to an end and people will say, "All you did was put up a statue of some bloke we've never heard of." His anxiety exposes an awkward question trapped within Winterton 2022's commitment to art: is sculpture a frippery only the affluent can indulge in? Faced with such questions, writer and community artist Francois Matarasso turns to Article 27 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits."³ Big Local has given Winterton's residents a rare chance to do exactly that—maybe not on unanimous terms, but certainly as a collective.

³ Francois Matarasso, *A Restless Art* (Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2019), p44



DC2 DEVONSHIRE COLLECTIVE



Chapter Five

Devonshire West

THERE'S AN OLD SAYING IN EASTBOURNE: "Don't go east of the pier, my dear." The area being warned against is Devonshire: long ago a fishing settlement, it has been the working-class district of Eastbourne since the town was created in the mid-1800s by William Cavendish, seventh Duke of Devonshire, from whom it gets its unexpected name. To my London eyes, there's an attractive familiarity to Seaside Road and its main drag: restaurants here offer food from around the world; above the shop fronts are some exquisite Victorian architectural details. But it's a world away from the sleek, chic Towner Art Gallery, star of Eastbourne's regeneration plans.

All around the English coast are towns like Eastbourne: popular holiday spots until cheap flights made the Mediterranean easily accessible, now struggling to make ends meet. One by one they are turning to culture to revive their fortunes. It's now possible to visit the Towner, the De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill and the Jerwood Gallery in Hastings in a single, exhilarating day—and to sail obliviously past Devonshire West while doing so. Thanks to Big Local, however, the residents in this long-overlooked area have a chance to put themselves on the town's cultural map.

Collective thinking

To begin thinking about how they might do this, Big Local board members joined councillors and property developers on a trip to nearby St Leonard's led by Jim Boot, their Big Local Rep (who provides the group with advice and support on behalf of Local Trust), and Local Trust trustee Ben Lee. They wanted to see how “creative people” had transformed St Leonard's into “a really vibrant up-and-coming area”, says Jim. From that visit emerged a galvanising idea. Two empty shops in Devonshire West had already been acquired by the council as part of a Coastal Communities Fund project, and a third by Eastbourne Housing Investment Company, a former Cash Converters, considered a blight on the area. The decision was taken that all three could be used to house arts-related activity, and in 2016 a new organisation was established, Devonshire Collective, to manage the properties as a single creative hub.

Adrian Ley, who is treasurer for Devonshire West Big Local, became chair of the board and finance director of Devonshire Collective, but is quick to admit that, in common with the council officers who helped set up DC, he “didn't have experience in the arts” before embarking on this creative regeneration plan. Throughout the process, the Collective has accessed that expertise by working with arts specialists as consultants, board members and staff. Together they've shaped “a model for how we could use those buildings,” says Adrian, with the eventual aim of becoming not only “totally independent” but “one of the major legacies that can carry on the work” of Big Local.

Across the three buildings, the Collective offers a small gallery, a cafe, several artists' studios, a print room, a pottery room, and space for public workshops. The programme of

events has been thrillingly eclectic, including drawing classes and comedy nights, theatre performances and an outdoor workshop at which participants could make their own art using a 12.5-tonne, vintage steam roller as their printing press. The Collective has already been successful in applying for public funding: Arts Council England awarded it a £55,000 grant to support a 16-month programme beginning in October 2017. More importantly, the Collective has forged a network with Devonshire West's other key cultural venues, the Leaf Hall Community Arts Centre and the Hippodrome Theatre, which will help attract people to these historic buildings too.

For the common good

The risk of cultural regeneration—often named the “Guggenheim effect” because of the impact of that museum on Bilbao—is that it overlooks locals in its focus on tourism. When I raise this with Jim, he points me to the work of Jess Steele and her organisation, Jericho Road, in Hastings. Steele emphasises the importance of “self-renovating” through “collective and relational” activity to keep a neighbourhood in the hands of its inhabitants. This “collaborative action for the common and mutual good”¹ is central to the Big Local ethos, both in Devonshire West, and in the project as a whole.

The cultural regeneration being led by the community of Devonshire West faces in many directions at once. As well as supporting Devonshire Collective, the Big Local group has funded the first few years of the Boho Winter Light Festival, which invites schoolchildren across Eastbourne to make their

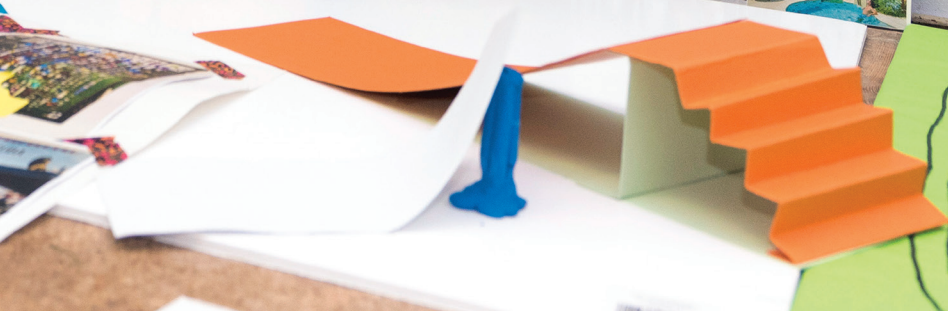
¹ More about Jess Steele and Jericho Road can be found here
<http://www.jerichoroad.co.uk/about/services/>

own lanterns and costumes for a parade leading from the Towner to Leaf Hall; helped board member Marie Wheeler set up a photography group for LGBT+ young people; and supported Community Stuff, an organisation co-founded by play worker and former Big Local board chair Sue Morris, and local artist Clare Hackney, who is transforming her work as a result.

Before she moved to Eastbourne, Clare ran her own art school for 20 years, so she's always been interested in working with the public. What's changed is how she encourages people to explore their everyday creativity (not only with art materials but also by learning to cook). Rather than reinforce the idea that art is "a precious thing that should be in a special establishment" such as a gallery, Clare invites people to join her in creating large-scale paintings in Eastbourne's parks, or to work with ultraviolet paints in the dark. One whole wall of the Community Stuff hub is covered with a sunny painting of Eastbourne's seafront, drawn out by Clare but painted by local residents. She sees the value of such activities, not in economic but in human and interpersonal terms: "People get a sense of working together on something that transforms in front of their eyes. You don't get that opportunity to come together as a community every day."

Jacqui Stewart, trustee of Leaf Hall, agrees. Since setting up the Winter Light festival in 2013 she's witnessed the extent to which "art is a real leveller. It doesn't matter where you're from, it doesn't matter what language you speak, everyone can do and achieve something." What's needed is to "capture all the amazing stories and all the amazing emotion" of those achievements, so that the value of art is no longer questioned but understood as vital to human life.





Chapter Six

Creative future

IN 2010, WHEN THE BIG LOTTERY FUND first started planning the Big Local project, Arts Council England published its strategy for the upcoming decade in a document titled Great Art and Culture for Everyone. Many have since argued that the phrase is not as egalitarian as it first appears: in fact, says Stella Duffy, co-founder of the Fun Palaces movement, it reinforces elitism. The word “great” contains within it notions of “excellence and quality” that were “defined by mainstream, metropolitan-based thinking many decades ago”; while the word “for” suggests a hierarchy by which “some people do arts and pass them on to others”¹, a general public who participate as consumers.

Duffy has long advocated a different slogan: “Arts for, by and with everyone.” And there are signs that Arts Council England is listening to such calls. In autumn 2018 it published a document called Shaping the Next Ten Years, part of its consultation process to guide its activities in the decade 2020-

¹ More by Stella Duffy on this topic can be found here <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jun/30/excellence-arts-should-not-be-defined-by-metropolitan-elite> and here <https://stelladuffy.blog/2016/02/29/great-art-for-everyone-the-problem-is-in-the-title/>

2030, in which it declares its ambition that, “every citizen of this country, at every point in their lives, must be given the power to develop their creativity and take part in cultural activities that are relevant to their lives on the one hand, and expand their horizons on the other.”² Throughout the document, the word “arts” has been replaced by “creativity”: the proposed strategy isn’t about being an artist but expanding opportunities to do creative things.

In other words, the Big Local areas focusing on creative activity might just be at the forefront of a major cultural shift.

Creative freedom

Big Local is an invitation to communities to look at the story of their lives, imagine a different set of possibilities and design a new story. From that perspective, every Big Local is a creative act, even if the community might not see it as such. But those who engage directly in creative activity are discovering the ways in which community arts can be, in the words of specialist Francois Matarasso, “emancipatory”. Community art, whether led by a professional artist or by residents exercising their everyday creativity, takes people out of their “existing models” of behaviour, and “demands that we think, feel, talk and share in new ways”³—not just alone but together.

The benefits of creative activity are being explored across Big Local, in overt and subtle ways. Simon Lawton, project coordinator for Revoe Big Local in Blackpool, says the group has been committed to art, even though “it’s not top of the

² Shaping the Next 10 Years can be read here https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/ACE%20Strategy%20Consultation%20Framework_Autumn2018%20Consultation.pdf

³ Francois Matarasso, *A Restless Art* (Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2019), p50

residents' priority list", because: "We recognise the power and usefulness of art in engaging people and getting them to participate. It's a tool we use to connect with people we don't normally connect with." Jo Bambrough, a trained youth and community- development worker on the board of West End Million in Morecambe, believes art can do this because it offers "a stigma-free environment, where you don't have to prove how worthless or broken you are to get support. I don't understand how change can happen without that kind of environment. Any kind of economic improvements, any improvements in community pride, all require a more connected community, and art is one of the best ways you can bring people together."

One of the accusations often raised against community-focused art is that it instrumentalises what ought to be purely aesthetic, forcing art to have a social or political agenda. Matarasso refutes this. "Art does not exist without people," he reasons. "It was invented to do what they needed, to empower them, to serve their purposes." The purpose it is being put to by Big Local communities is multiple, a push and pull between engagement, emancipation and economic growth.

In his book *Against Creativity*, geographer Oli Mould turns against the word "creativity" itself—at least, against the ways in which it has been taken over by "capitalistic processes". He argues that "creativity under capitalism is not creative at all because it only produces more of the same form of society",⁴ in particular, the same social inequalities. If Big Local areas are successfully avoiding this, it's because communities themselves are choosing to be creative in ways that don't reinforce existing social and economic conditions but seek to undermine or overturn them.

⁴ Oli Mould, *Against Creativity* (Verso 2018), p50

Creative change

All advocates for the power of creativity, me included, are quick to say that art changes individual lives. But research published in the AHRC Cultural Value Project suggests that we can only appreciate the effects of engaging in art and creativity fully if we take account of the changes across a community. Those changes are rarely direct, but occur because art and creativity shape “conditions for change through a myriad of spillover effects”.⁵ Tracking those spillover effects among, for instance, the children of Newington or the residents of Grangefield in Winterton might take a lifetime. That doesn’t mean they’re not taking place.

Big Local communities are changing through their embrace of art. And Local Trust is changing too. Over the course of 2018 the organisation joined forces with the Big Lottery Fund, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation to shape a new programme: Creative Civic Change. Building on the Big Local model, 16 communities will be funded to support community-led arts and everyday creativity in ways that inspire positive change.

With every passing year, that list of extraordinary community arts events named in the introduction chapter is getting longer, and with it something else is changing: 21st-century understandings of what it means to be an artist, what an artist does, and what art can do.

⁵ Geoffrey Crossick & Patrycja Kaszynska, *Understanding the Value of Arts & Culture: The AHRC Cultural Value Project*, p39



“Big Local communities have realised something: that they don’t need to wait for permission from an arts organisation to engage in creative activity; instead they can enjoy their own everyday creativity on their own terms.”

Across England, 150 communities are using £1 million each to make their area a better place to live. They are part of Big Local, a resident-led programme of local transformation, described as ‘perhaps the most important and ambitious experiment in community development ever undertaken in the UK’.

Maddy Costa explores how four Big Local areas – Newington, Clubmoor, Devonshire West and Winterton – are each using arts and creativity to transform their neighbourhoods. Within the context of the Arts Council England’s proposed strategy for 2020-2030 which puts the expansion of opportunities for every citizen to do creative things at its core, Costa suggests these Big Local communities are at the forefront of a major cultural shift.

This essay is one of a series exploring how people and places are changing through Big Local. Each essay considers the lessons of Big Local for institutions and policymakers interested in radical devolution of power and responsibility to a community level.

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