



CREATIVE BARKING AND DAGENHAM

**CREATIVE
AND
PEOPLE
PLACES**

ENGAGING COMMUNITIES IN THE ARTS



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ENGAGING COMMUNITIES IN THE ARTS

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CASE STUDY THEME

› Engaging Communities in the Arts

PROJECT SUMMARY

Creative Barking and Dagenham (CBD) is an inspiring programme of arts and creative activities, for people living, working and socialising in Barking and Dagenham. CBD aims to create new ways for local people to experience outstanding arts and creative activities, and to promote the borough as a place where exciting art, of all forms, is made and shown.

CBD is one of 21 Creative People and Places (CPP) programmes funded by Arts Council England. It is managed by a steering group of arts and non-arts partners including Studio 3 Arts, a locally based arts organisation which focuses on socially-engaged work; A New Direction, an Arts Council England Bridge organisation which supports children and young people to access London's creative and cultural offer; Barking Enterprise Centre, London Borough of Barking and Dagenham; and Barking and Dagenham Council for Voluntary Service.

Drawing on interviews with CBD staff, Cultural Connectors - CBD's network of local residents who are involved in all aspects of the programme, and CBD's blog, this case study explores community engagement in practice, and focuses on the impact and outcomes of the programme. It further examines the approaches that are considered to be good practice and unpicks the building blocks for success and programme sustainability.



Creative Barking and Dagenham: DAGFEST. Photo: Anita Adeshina

KEY FINDINGS

- › CBD has community engagement at the heart of its programme. CBD has built a growing network of Cultural Connectors which are involved in all aspects of the programme, from design to decision making.
- › CBD's approach to the whole programme is flexible and adaptive which has allowed the programme to develop organically from the grassroots and be responsive to the needs of the community, which means that local people are starting to engage in the arts more.
- › Local artists and creative people are now starting to see Barking and Dagenham as a more attractive place to live and work, as a result of CBD improving the borough's identity as a creative place and increasing the visibility of its arts and cultural offer.

Creative Barking and Dagenham: *The Colour of Time*. Photo: Mike Attridge

INTRODUCTION

Barking and Dagenham is an outer London borough which is often regarded as a place that is on the margins, as neither Essex nor London. The borough is renowned for its manufacturing industrial heritage, with Ford, a major automotive plant and Sanofi-Aventis, a flagship pharmaceutical manufacturing facility, which were once the borough's biggest employers. Ford still has an engine plant in Dagenham; however as its production processes have become increasingly automated, it has significantly reduced the size of its workforce. These factories played a significant role in shaping the area's social and cultural landscape, and for many local people they provided a social life, leisure facilities and a sense of identity. Barking and Dagenham today is characterised by higher than average levels of deprivation and long-term unemployment.

“There was definitely a sense that creative people in the borough were just looking elsewhere for their opportunities, not just work opportunities, but also social opportunities, leisure opportunities, and opportunities to go and see something with their friends.” CBD

Barking and Dagenham has a lower than average level of engagement with the arts. Many local people often felt disconnected to the place because there was a sense that there was a lack of opportunities on offer in the borough.

“To get any artistic or creative stimulation or inspiration, you need to go out of the borough. I grew up here and there was nothing to do here locally in the arts. There's a lot of untapped talent in the borough, local people need to know that they can make it in the arts.” Cultural Connector

Equally, artists and creative people in the borough tend to work in isolation of each other. According to CBD, “people that had an interest in arts often didn't know anyone else that had an interest in the arts locally”. There was also sense of disenfranchisement around the arts, as creative people felt that they did not fully understand how commissioning decisions were made and often felt like they had to have the 'right' connections to get their work noticed. In summary, there is need for greater investment in community engagement, networking, and collective decision making in the borough to not only strengthen the borough's arts and cultural offer, but also to make it relevant and accessible to artists and local people that wouldn't normally engage with the arts.

“There were a number of long standing arts organisations which were doing excellent things, but connecting up just seemed impossible, partly because of the size of the borough and partly because they had quite different remits, there seemed to be a real lack of partnership.” CBD

APPROACH TO COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The CBD programme is made up of five commissioning strands which the Cultural Connectors have helped to shape and deliver - Landmark Commissions, Summer Festivals, Neighbourhood Commissions, People Going Places, and the Reach Fund:

- › Landmark Commissions are site-specific events and projects designed to showcase the borough as a place where great art happens, for example *The Becontree Mural* wall at Valence House Museum's visitor centre.
- › CBD and the Cultural Connectors organise Summer Festivals such as *DAGFEST*, which attracted large audiences in its first year and featured both international and local performers across a range of art forms including circus, dance, street theatre, music and film.
- › Neighbourhood Commissions are six-month artist residences in areas of the borough with little cultural provision which aim to support the growth of creativity and ambition in local communities.
- › People Going Places is a commissioning scheme designed to strengthen and diversify the local arts sector through supporting professional development, learning and action research.
- › The Reach Fund is a small-scale commissioning scheme which provides funding to support marketing or artists costs for creative events.

CBD has a unique approach which involves working with local Cultural Connectors to bring the arts to everyday life. They are involved in all aspects of the programme, from arranging trips and visits, sitting on funding panels, assisting artists, curating and producing festivals, leading workshops, taking photographs, doing office

work, stewarding and welcoming guests at events, to helping CBD to interview staff and freelancers.

The approach CBD has taken to recruit Cultural Connectors has been to reach out to people through different channels such as volunteer fairs, women's business networking events, community days, and town hall events, which allow CBD the opportunity to approach people individually to find out what their interests are, tell them about CBD and invite them to come along to a meeting or event to find out more. In terms of the profile of Cultural Connectors, roughly two-thirds are female and a third are male, which is broadly what CBD expected, as the arts tend to be over represented by women, although it is trying to encourage more men to take part. The age range of the Cultural Connectors is from 19 through to those in their early 60s.

CBD organise regular socials for Cultural Connectors and those interested in joining the network. The socials are designed to be occasions where anyone interested in arts and creative activities can come along and meet each other and get involved in things which interest them. Cultural Connectors also meet when they respond to invitations from CBD to get involved in the design, decision making and delivery of projects. Different Cultural Connectors get involved in different aspects of the programme based on their interests, skills and availability. The amount of time a Cultural Connector gives to CBD varies from person to person, and from project to project, however CBD has tried to keep this as flexible as possible.

A model of volunteering where if you have five free hours a week is quite out of date, so what we wanted to do was create a network which had a big enough group around it, and diverse enough amount of opportunities in to keep people interested." CBD

Creative Barking and Dagenham: The Becontree Mural. Photo: Emil Charlaff



OUTCOMES

In the two years since the programme was launched, CBD has offered local residents more than 800 different creative events, workshops, and activities involving 233 volunteers and around 32,000 participants at 27 venues across the borough.¹

CBD has successfully mobilised over 100 local people as Cultural Connectors of the programme. Cultural Connectors have benefitted greatly from being part of a growing network of creative people which is leading to increased interaction, knowledge sharing, and collaboration. Many Cultural Connectors have also been actively involved in the various decision making panels for the programme's commissions.

“I have developed so many skills which I didn't know that I had until I was given the opportunity.” Cultural Connector

CBD has also given its Cultural Connectors and over 500 other local people the opportunity to access inspiring arts experiences which they would not normally have to chance to participate in. CBD organises regular trips, shows, exhibitions and events at renowned arts venues such as the Barbican Centre, Southbank Centre, Tate Modern, Royal Opera House, Broadway Theatre and National Theatre. CBD has partnered with venues including Royal Opera House and Sadler's Wells Theatre to receive exclusive ticket deals for local people, and recently became one of Sadler's Wells community partners.

¹ CBD (2015) Creative Barking and Dagenham Headlines, Sept 2015. <http://www.creativebd.org.uk/blog/>

“Meeting people and having a network of people has helped to open doors to different opportunities. Before CBD we had to make all the connections ourselves, so you felt like an outsider and it wasn’t very welcoming.” Cultural Connector

On an individual level, one of the Cultural Connectors started off as a mature student and theatre apprentice, but through the support and contacts of CBD he was introduced to Balbir Singh Dance Company (which creates dynamic dance through a synthesis of Kathak, live music and contemporary dance) and Punchdrunk (a theatre company which pioneered a form of immersive theatre in which the audience is free to choose what to watch and where to go). He later went on to secure paid work with both companies, and is now working closely with them as part of their freelance team.

Another Cultural Connector is a single mother who gives a lot of her time to the voluntary sector and is a cultural education governor but had never been to the Southbank Centre or the Barbican Centre before. It was only through CBD that she discovered all these things that she loves. She has since taken on more responsibility in these roles, including chairing several group meetings and was actively involved in the programming for *DAGFEST*. CBD also introduced one of the Cultural Connectors, a photographer and filmmaker to an opportunity with Barking and Dagenham London Borough Council. She was successfully awarded £16,000 to deliver the video project for the Council.

“I worked on community arts projects for the last 5 to 6 years, but actually it’s always been a low level, there wasn’t this large organisation which we have now tapped into. For me it was great to build connections with other creative people in the community, its brilliant. I’ve been involved in curating some beautiful arts which I have got to experience in the borough and I actually got work out of it as well.” Cultural Connector

So far, CBD has enabled 15 people to access new paid creative jobs or contracts in the borough. Local artists and creative people are now starting to see Barking and Dagenham as a more attractive place to live and work, as a result of CBD improving the borough’s identity as a creative place and increasing the visibility of its arts and cultural offer. In August 2015, the Observer newspaper published a high profile article which featured the work of CBD and how it is helping the borough celebrate its past.

“It’s important to get people to stay in the borough and work in the borough. I’m now able now to work in this field more, but I wanted to move as I wasn’t getting enough work or interest around here, but I’m more likely to want to stay and work in the borough now. So I’m an asset, and the borough needs people like me to stay and work here.” Cultural Connector

WHAT WORKED WELL?

- › **Attracting Cultural Connectors to programme** – CBD’s approach to recruiting Cultural Connectors has been effective in terms of generating interest from local residents to join the network.

“I believe that art is the best way to bring people together, so that was my motivation to get involved.” Cultural Connector

- › **Diversity and inclusion** – The Cultural Connectors come from all different walks of life. CBD is proud of the diversity of people who have joined its network. Many of the Cultural Connectors have never volunteered before, and most Cultural Connectors see CBD as something which they identify with and want to be part of, rather than as volunteering opportunity per se.

“The only criteria are, that you believe in our objectives and are willing to support them and that you are a local resident in so far as you live here or you have a strong connection to the area.” CBD

“It’s been extremely welcoming and our opinions are really welcomed. We all come from different backgrounds.” Cultural Connector

- › **Flexibility and adaptation** – Although CBD had a framework for what they wanted the programme to be, a degree of flexibility and adaptation around this has proven to be beneficial and meant that the programme could grow organically from the grassroots and be responsive to the needs of the community. For example, the *Park Life* project did not work out the way CBD had envisaged, but it later evolved into a successful outdoor arts and festivals strand, in which the Cultural Connectors played a critical role in terms of both curating and producing the events.

“Some arts don’t engage the wider public because the message is so contained and specific that it’s not broad enough. Cultural connectors define that, and we let the programme be what it is to them.” CBD

- › **Raising awareness and knowledge sharing** – CBD has set up a WhatsApp group and a closed Facebook group which is designed to promote group interaction and knowledge sharing amongst the Cultural Connectors. Both groups are very active and have helped people to find opportunities, give and receive support and share their skills amongst the community of Cultural Connectors. CBD also posts its opportunities and events to both these groups.

“There’s other ways which we could have grown community engagement, but it feels like for this place and this time, that was a really good way to do it.” CBD



Creative Barking and Dagenham: No Fit State Circus. Photo: Anita Adeshina

LESSONS LEARNT

- › **Scale of Cultural Connectors network** – Initially CBD envisaged that the programme would have 30 Cultural Connectors, but later realised it would work much better as a larger network of creative people, not only to create a critical mass, but also to give people greater flexibility to get involved and use the network in ways which suited their own individual needs. CBD recently changed their board into an advisory group to bring more people around the table, including four of their Cultural Connectors.

“There’s stuff around breath vs depth, we have big targets to reach and we needed a big network to be able to do that. We could have 10 of the most well supported Cultural Connectors but they wouldn’t be able to what this network can do.” CBD

- › **Limited staff and resources** – Resourcing is an issue as CBD is a small team, which means that they have to be firm and prioritise what they do. CBD does not have the capacity to do all the things that they want to do and would not be able to make the programme work as well as it has done, without the support of the Cultural Connectors. CBD also provides Cultural Connectors the support they need to enable them to do things for themselves, rather than relying on CBD to do it for them.

“At times when the programme has been quite difficult to deliver, the Cultural Connectors have been a continual source of inspiration. They are not just a group to manage and resource.” CBD

- › **Reaching beyond Cultural Connectors** – CBD’s evaluation found that its summer festivals were reaching new audiences, as over 50% of people that attended had not had an arts experience in the past 12 months. While the programme has reached out to people beyond its Cultural Connectors, there is still more work to be done to raise awareness and to reach more local people through its activities.

ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE

CBD believes that it has achieved excellence in its community engagement by having a real understanding of the borough and its needs, and empowering local people to have a stake in their arts provision and to shape the programme as they see fit. CBD has a passionate team of Cultural Connectors that want to develop arts in the borough and to make Barking and Dagenham a creative place which they are proud to be a part of. What is innovative about CBD's approach is that it is bespoke, and this has allowed the programme to respond to people's needs individually as well as one collective group. CBD has provided Cultural Connectors individual support such as skills development training, introductions and work opportunities as CBD has taken time to understand each Cultural Connectors interests and aspirations, to enable the local arts sector to flourish and grow.

Without this there would have been a danger that they would be quite a lot of individually interesting arts things that happened, but not a sense that the borough is changing in terms of arts.

“Many Cultural Connectors have received work from the network, skills development opportunities, and great introductions. All things which are about them as individuals and that’s really important too.” CBD

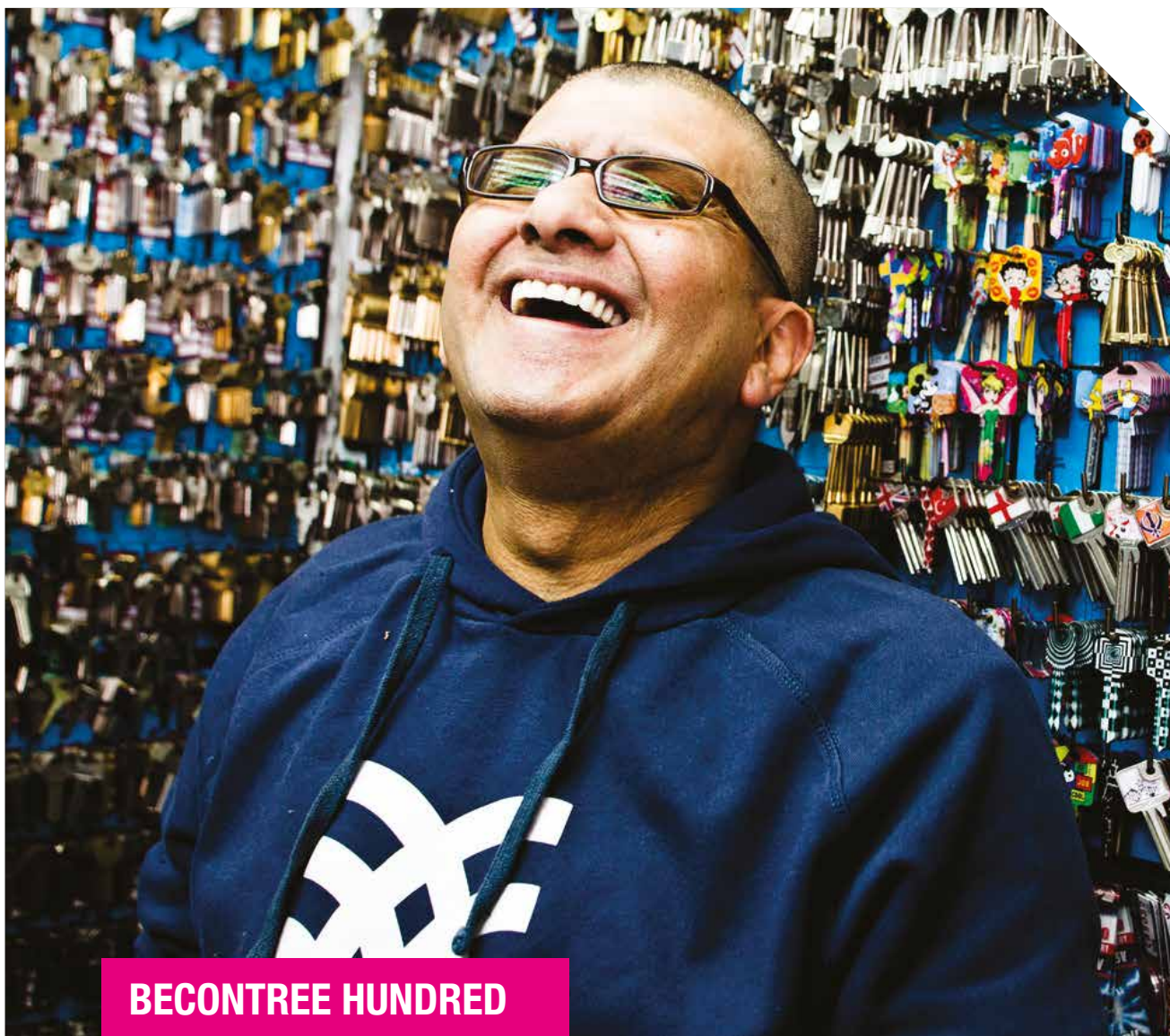
SUSTAINABILITY

CBD is building a legacy through the relationships which have been established through the Cultural Connectors network. CBD is working with Cultural Connectors to develop a sense of loyalty towards developing the arts in the borough and local ownership of the programme. CBD's vision for the future is that the Cultural Connectors will one day be in a position to direct parts of the programme themselves.

“Longevity and sustainability are so important, especially around here. Without CBD it would be difficult for people to commit and dedicate that much time to keep things going. It might be worth turning Cultural Connectors into an official organisation in its own right. Maybe that will be something to work towards.” Cultural Connectors

CBD is actively pursuing ways to making it possible for local people to become a Cultural Connector, and is looking to match more Cultural Connectors with other Cultural Connectors and with more arts organisations. One idea is to let the Cultural Connectors network continually grow, but create a core group of around 50 Cultural Connectors to ensure that there are slightly different offers available to people.

“There are some fantastic things happening, but it just needs to be connected up a bit more. The CPP premise is right. If you fund people to work more at a local level they can do some great stuff.” CBD



BECONTREE HUNDRED

Becontree Hundred was a Landmark commission project led by People's Palace Projects, in which a renowned digital artist, a filmmaker and a photographer worked with local people to create 100 extraordinary images of local people, places, residents and traders. The photos were exhibited in Dagenham Library, in shops along the Heathway, and on exterior walls of local houses. The project then developed into a partnership with TFL resulting in the large-scale display of 19 of the best images in three underground stations in Dagenham for the next 5 years and possibly beyond. 12 Cultural Connectors took the lead in deciding which images would be displayed in the stations.

“We are often approached by artists who want to pitch ideas for work they would like create here. We always ask them to come and meet with groups of Cultural Connectors who ask the most insightful, thoughtful and relevant questions about the work and are just the best barometer of whether the ideas could work here and whether the artists would be able to engage local audiences.” CBD

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