



MADE IN CORBY

**CREATIVE
AND
PEOPLE
PLACES**

ENGAGING COMMUNITIES IN THE ARTS



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**



A.N.D





Photo: Kate Dyer

ENGAGING COMMUNITIES IN THE ARTS

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CASE STUDY THEME

> Engaging Communities in the Arts

PROJECT SUMMARY

Made in Corby is a three year programme funded by the Arts Council England's Creative People and Places Programme. It aims to engage more people in Corby than ever before in arts activities. In the context of low arts engagement and high poverty rates, the programme takes a community engagement approach which gives significant decision-making power to the community and invites people to explore, develop, review and take part in art in Corby. This entails bringing together local and external artists, amateurs and professionals as well as encouraging people to apply for funding to make their own artistic ideas a reality.

“Corby: It’s the sense of family, curiosity, of being able to move things on, and working together.” Consortium member

This case study of Made in Corby’s community engagement approach draws on interviews with community members, local artists, consortium members and staff. Existing qualitative evaluations¹ of various programme strands also provided rich evidence for this case study, which focuses on approaches, successes and lessons learnt in community engagement.

¹ Written testimonies of choir members; write up of the Big Ideas Panel evaluation session; write up of the evaluation with the cast members of No Way Back; Year 1 evaluation report ‘The Story so far’.



Corby Big Film Week, funded by the Big Ideas Panel, October 2015. Photo: Alison Bagley

KEY FINDINGS

- › Based on case study interviews and local evaluation findings, the community-led approach to co-design, production and commissioning pursued by Made in Corby successfully built local ownership, capacity and supported audience development.
- › A very effective approach to community engagement involved collaboration between local people and professionals from inside and outside of Corby. Community members previously not engaged in the arts learnt how to commission and organise arts projects. Local audiences were drawn by the promise of seeing renowned artists or their fellow community members perform on stage. For the local performers themselves this approach enabled them to learn from other artists and build their skills, confidence and social networks.
- › Within 18 months of programme delivery, Made in Corby has drawn new audiences and enabled community members to become producers and organisers of art events. In order to reach deeper into the diverse communities of Corby, especially those previously unengaged and lacking cultural confidence, sustained efforts are needed.

INTRODUCTION

A strong theme emerging from the case study interviews was that the town has suffered economically and socially as a result of the collapse of the steel industry in the 1970s, which was a major employer. Over the past six years, the town benefited from significant infrastructural investments such as a train station and an Olympic-sized swimming pool. Most importantly for the arts, an art gallery, a cinema and the Corby Cube, a civic centre which houses a theatre and library, were established.

In this context, the Consortium behind Made in Corby set out to overcome the challenge of lack of community engagement in the arts. The Consortium is made up of five organisations which are led by Groundwork Northamptonshire. The programme was funded through Round 2 of the CPP national programme and launched in June 2014 to deliver three programme strands:

- *Signature Commissions* bring acclaimed artists to Corby to work alongside local people to raise their ambitions and belief in Corby as a place of art. The first involved the local choir Deep Roots Tall Trees (DRTT) performing songs co-written with Barb Jung together with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra (RPO) in 2014. In the following year, Frantic Assembly, a theatre company, together with a cast from Corby, developed the physical theatre play 'No Way Back'. The final commission will see the staging of a musical with Perfect Pitch in 2016 together with Corby's Amateur Theatrical Society.
- Communities of interest and geography are empowered to commission artists to deliver a piece of work. Made in Corby assists these *Community Commissions* by setting up community panels and assigning them artistic mentors to guide the panels' activities. This activity branch commenced in September 2015 and involves working with two geographical communities and a group of adults with learning disabilities.
- Under the banner of 'Big Ideas' Corby citizens are encouraged to create and see art in its various forms. They can apply for funding from the *Big Ideas Panel* which consists of community members to implement their own arts projects. *Big Nights Out* take place regularly and allow community members to take advantage of the cultural offers inside and outside of Corby. Finally, *Big Days In* are taster workshops that provide accessible and high quality live experiences and participation opportunities.

These strands are underpinned by regular *Community Conversations* which see Made in Corby staff visit networks, community associations, groups and centres to reach out to a wide variety of Corby citizens to discuss and plan their programme.

APPROACH TO COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Many interviewees described Corby as a friendly and community-oriented place, where partnership-working was at the heart of many public initiatives. However, a challenge for the arts sector in Corby was that many local people see the arts as elitist and being a luxury good. In fact, Corby community members reported that, in the 'working class mind-set of local people', **they do not feel entitled to attend arts events or able to have a say in decisions related to the arts.** In recognition of this, Made in Corby's community engagement strategy was designed to give Corby people ownership over the design process and to show that they can be creators of art, not just consumers.

“Corby has always been a bit of a wilderness for the arts.

There is a core group of people who are involved heavily but getting it to the wider community needs different strategies.

People need to be told ‘You can come!’” Community member

Several routes to community engagement are being taken by Made in Corby. In 2012, Consortium members embarked on an extensive **community consultation process** to feed into the programme design and inform the bid for CPP funding, speaking to over 400 people. From this consultation ideas such as the Signature Commission strand came about.

Another example of **community members influencing and shaping the arts in their community** comes from the third Signature Commission. In order to decide which musical would be performed in 2016, four writing teams submitted their initial ideas to a producing committee made up of local people who chose which ideas to take forward. The writers then presented short excerpts from their musical and explained the plot during a pitching event, upon which a panel of industry experts and local people as well as the audience made the decision. Similarly, the Big Ideas panel, which is made up of local artists and non-arts people, designed the judging criteria, the application forms and the process from scratch, thus giving them a great feeling of ownership.

“[A side effect of local decision-making is]

I can’t tell you what will happen in 2016 and its December 2015.

It is simultaneously scary but massively exciting.” Consortium member

Community engagement also takes the form of seeing **local people produce art**. By funding ideas from local people, the Big Ideas Panel is one way of facilitating this process. Made in Corby has also been successful in enabling community members to discover or broaden their artistic skill set by bringing them together with professional artists from outside of Corby. For the concert with the RPO, the DRTT choir wrote the lyrics and music themselves, which was a new experience for many of their members. The ‘No Way Back’ theatre production saw local actors perform alongside nationally renowned actors, with the audience being unable to tell amateur and professionals apart.

To get to the stage of putting on successful plays and concerts and attracting an interested audience, Made in Corby puts a lot of work into **outreach and audience development**. This is very time-intensive as they aim for as much face-to-face engagement as possible. For community conversations and taster sessions, staff and artists engage schools, sport clubs, aerobic classes, young men’s clubs, mothers’ groups, substance misuser recovery groups, church groups and many more. Successful marketing activities included a photographic exhibition in supermarkets with pictures of the ‘No Way Back’ cast practicing, which was very effective as people recognised other community members on those images.

“[We aim to use] all opportunities in a structured and informal way,

so people don’t feel they have been left out.” Consortium member

OUTCOMES

Based on local evaluations and the case study interviews, it is very clear that the Made in Corby programme has contributed towards **positive outcomes for many individuals** over the past two years. Feedback from choir members who performed alongside the RPO as well as local people who performed in 'No Way Back' performance showed that participants had gained self-confidence, developed new skills such as song writing, dancing or acting, and made new social contacts. They told stories of having surpassed their own expectations which hugely contributed to their personal growth as well as giving them new ambitions in life. Many also mentioned their plans to continue their engagement in the arts.

“What I took out of [the No Way Back experience] is that I’d use drugs and alcohol because I had no self-esteem. Getting into recovery and doing this, going on the stage has given me great confidence. It has given me the skills and stage presence, that’s self-esteem and awareness. I approach the traffic lights and I ‘arrive’ – same as getting stuff out the fridge. I’m so grateful Made in Corby came down to [the local drug recovery centre] and not just normal groups – that was so brilliant, they need to keep on being bold.” ‘No Way Back’ cast member

“Since the big RPO concert last year I have seen such a change in our choir as a whole. We have formed some wonderful relationships with one another, friendships have grown between us all and the pride we have in one another’s achievements I haven’t seen replicated in quite the same way anywhere else.” Choir member

“I’m going to keep dancing like no one is watching.” ‘No Way Back’ cast member

There is also evidence of **increased awareness and changing perceptions of the arts among individuals who engaged with the programme**. For example, Made in Corby’s qualitative evaluation showed that members of the Big Ideas Panel, who had not been involved in the arts before, gained a better insight into the various arts activities in Corby as well as broadened their views on what art is to different people and who can get involved.

“I’m aware of the arts but didn’t know all that was going on. I’m amazed at how much we have that I didn’t know existed.” Big Ideas Panellist



The Den of Decadent Romantics poetry tent at Much Ado About Corby, August 2015. Photo: Tom Bingham

“The [project applications] offered a different dimension.

Some didn’t seem particularly arty but I changed my perception.

I couldn’t see the value but I found a different way of looking at things.” Big Ideas Panellist

“Previously I thought artists were elitist, not ‘better than you, just different’.

But I see they have their own challenges to overcome.

This has humanised the artists!” Big Ideas Panellist

Outcomes for the wider Corby population and the arts sector in particular are still emerging and will naturally need more time to become visible. Already, Made in Corby is seeing increased interest in their Big Nights Out and Big Days In; audience perceptions of where art can take place are being challenged by performing in the local football stadium, the woodland and community centres; more opportunities for arts engagement exist and have enabled new audiences who lack cultural confidence to attend and participate, as shown by local evaluations. However, during the case study interview community members commented that there is still a long way to go until deeply rooted ideas of art and who is allowed to engage in the arts are overcome.



Fun Palaces, Big Day In, Photo: Paul Balmer

WHAT WORKED WELL

- **Local people and professionals from outside of Corby working together** proved to be a recipe for success in Made in Corby's Signature Commissions. Audiences are drawn by the reputation of external artists as well as the opportunity to see their community members perform on stage. The locals involved in the projects learn from the professionals and are inspired to put on more ambitious projects in the future. An example of good practice in this field is further described later in this case study.
- **Word of mouth and face to face marketing** is the key to reaching people in Corby. This relates back to the fact that people feel a lack of entitlement and ownership over the arts. Community members and Consortium members pointed out the importance of being invited by someone they know and trust, to overcome their initial scepticism.

"You go out and talk to people. To get people [to come to arts events], you have to have somebody they trust talk to them and say:

'You will enjoy this. Go and give it a go.'" Consortium member

LESSONS LEARNT

- › Conducting credible **community engagement is time-intensive and difficult to get right**. The extent to which Made in Corby staff are able to reach out to different groups in the community is limited by their resources and time. In terms of decision-making, the Made in Corby programme strikes a balance between its ambitions to be as community-led and inclusive as possible whilst being efficient and sticking to timelines.
- › **Not everyone wants to be an artist**. As much as community outreach efforts aim to give as many people as possible the chance to produce and make decisions on arts activities, some community members are happy to simply watch and enjoy art without getting too involved.
- › Community members, particularly those with no previous arts involvement, **need more time and support** to come forward and have the confidence to lead their own arts projects. The Big Ideas Panel members reported that they would have liked to see more applications in their initial two funding rounds, especially from the non-artist community.

ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE

The Consortium members acknowledged the possible tensions between wanting to achieve excellence in the art whilst also having a community-led programme. Excellence in community engagement was characterised by Consortium members as dismantling the barriers to arts participation, sourcing ideas from and making decisions with the community and engendering a feeling of ownership.

One danger of this approach is community members opting for ‘more of the same’ and refraining from inviting new types of art into Corby. A second tension lies in choosing between local and external artists. Consortium members reported that locals often perceive artists from outside of Corby to be more professional. However, simply buying in excellent art would leave local talents underdeveloped and community members potentially less engaged in the design and development of the arts programme.

Made in Corby seeks to strike a balance. Depending on the particular project, community members are involved in decision-making, design, and production and performing. Local or external artists then work with community members to make their ideas a reality. Consortium members felt that this process produces excellent art as well as keeps the process rooted in the Corby community.

“Quality can lie in different places. It is not always about the product.” Consortium member

“There are several tensions in that community engagement space.

You look at other CPPs who have a more programming type approach.

What we are trying to do is more meandering and harder.” Consortium member



GOOD PRACTICE

The choice of working with the theatre company Frantic Assembly and the approach to community engagement taken by the directors— Scott Graham and Neil Bettles —were key to the success of Made in Corby’s second Signature Commission. As well as Frantic Assembly having established themselves as an “innovative and progressive theatre company” (*The Times*), Scott and Neil were raised in Corby which was another pull factor for the audience. The directors stayed true to the community-led approach by basing the plot of ‘No Way Back’ on personal stories of the local cast. During the evaluation session led by Made in Corby, the local cast members reported that they were initially challenged by the demands of physical theatre but hugely benefitted from the collaborative approach and trust that Scott and Neil placed in them. This example shows that the choice of professionals to work with on a community-focused art project is important to achieving a fruitful working relationship which produces an excellent artistic outcome as well as staying true to the ethos of community engagement.

“From the professionals to us, it didn’t feel like there was

an ego in the room.” ‘No Way Back’ cast member

“Trust- it was reciprocal between, the community

performers and the professionals.” ‘No Way Back’ cast member

SUSTAINABILITY

The Consortium sees Made in Corby as a catalyst for local artists and audiences. The legacy of the various arts projects is the capacity and excitement that is being created and which enables local artists and non-artists to initiate, fund and run art projects in the future. This long-term vision of using the community engagement strategy to build capacity was already part of Made in Corby's Business Plan:

“The Made in Corby programme is designed by communities and artists to discover new things together through accessible and collective learning that adds to their knowledge and skills. The energy created by this approach is more likely to be sustainable, investing in the development of people and nurturing independent groups.” Made in Corby Business Plan

However, community members and local artists acknowledged that Corby still has a long way on its journey to internalising art as a locally owned and produced source of enjoyment and pride. Given the relatively high levels of deprivation in Corby, future programmes need funding to offer art that is accessible to all parts of the population. Finally, the Consortium members noted that there is room for more lesson-sharing between arts organisations in Corby and between CPP places to ensure that future activities can learn from current experiences.

“We lit the fire, now we have to keep fanning the flames. You can't just come in for a limited time and plant some seed money and hope that things will go on. Because they won't.” Community member

“It's not enough to have a short blitz of three years. It needs continuity. You need to keep on chipping away.” Community member



Photo: Tom Bingham

MADE IN CORBY

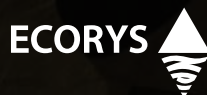
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