

# The Share at Guidepost Social Club

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The Share preview credit: Jason Thompson

*The Share at Guidepost Social Club explored the role of working men's clubs as a hub for the arts in a community by establishing a partnership with a Working Men's Club in South East Northumberland.*

The project, which was delivered over 18 months, has provided learning from a range of arts activities, including the work of two artists in residence and culminated in an exhibition<sup>1</sup> at Woodhorn Museum visited by over 23,000 people between June and October 2015. The exhibition comprised a collection of work created and inspired by the people and heritage of the Club including work by photographer in residence, Mik Critchlow and a selection of drinking vessels made by the 'Over 60s Bingo Club' with the support of ceramic artist Emilie Taylor.

## Project Information

### Project aims

The project aimed to look at a model which uses working men's clubs, and specifically their social space and members, as a focus for arts activities within local communities. One of the objectives of the project was to try and revitalise the fortunes of social clubs by helping to put them back

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<sup>1</sup> The Share - A Portrait of Guide Post CIU and the cultural life of a community

into the heart of the community as a cultural and social hub through the provision of arts.

## Target participants

A wide range of participants have been involved and engaged in the development and delivery of the project including club members, people using the club as a venue for arts activities and the wider community. The participation of the club in the project has been driven by the former Club Treasurer, Joyce Watts, and former Chair, John Watts, with the support of the club's committee of volunteers. Working closely with Andrea Hawkins, the curator commissioned by bait to lead the project, this small group of engaged individuals have acted as 'champions' for the project, helping to reduce barriers to participation (e.g. a lack of confidence or knowledge of the arts), engaging groups including the 'Over 60s Bingo Club' and providing a bridge between bait and the club.

## Project partners

The key partners in the project included:

- **bait** Creative People and Places programme as commissioner. Creative Producer **Juliet Hardy** as Project Lead and **Fran Arnold** as Creative Producer (maternity cover); **Liz Ritson** (Woodhorn Events and Exhibition Officer) as lead on exhibition
- **Guidepost Social Club**, a working men's club based on High Street, Guidepost near Choppington in South East Northumberland;
- Curator and project manager **Andrea Hawkins** from Common Good Society<sup>2</sup>;
- Ashington-born photographer **Mik Critchlow**<sup>3</sup>;
- Ceramist **Emilie Taylor**<sup>4</sup>;
- **Dr Julie Crawshaw**, Research Associate, Newcastle University; and
- Visual artists **Natalie Frost** and **Louise Bradley**.

## Project activities

The initial idea for the project emerged from research carried out at Northumberland Archives by project curator Andrea Hawkins, building on her interest in the history and role of social clubs in cultural heritage of communities since the late nineteenth century. The project had objectives to support the financial sustainability of a working man's club through a coordinated arts offer which would lead to increased footfall and local participation whilst helping to reintegrate the club into the heart of the community.

Guidepost Social Club volunteered to offer arts activity in partnership with bait following a meeting of approximately 20 CIU<sup>5</sup> clubs at which the curator, Andrea Hawkins, outlined the idea for the project and requested expressions of interest. Andrea worked closely with the former Chair and Treasurer of the Club and bait for over 18 months to actively engage club members in a range of arts activities. The Guide Post Social Club Open Weekend in August 2014 saw the club committee and members work alongside the bait team and Andrea Hawkins to develop an arts programme for the benefit of both existing and new members. During the Open Weekend a range of free activities were provided for people of all ages included printmaking workshops, story-

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<sup>2</sup> <https://commongoodsoc.wordpress.com/about/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.mikcritchlow.com/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.emilietaylor.co.uk/>

<sup>5</sup> Working Men's Club & Institute Union - <http://www.wmciu.org.uk/>

telling and singing performances.

The club decided in conjunction with the curator that they would like to combine two artists in residence with regular family-orientated workshops. The first artist in residence was Ashington-born social documentary photographer Mik Critchlow, who spent considerable time in the club building relationships, getting to know people and capturing everyday life. In addition, Mik also supported club members' to develop their own photography skills in a series of workshops.

The second artist in residence, socially engaged ceramist Emilie Taylor, worked with the 'Over 60s Bingo Club' to create a series of pots including a bingo board and drinking vessels. The work was decorated with images illustrating the personal and local cultural histories shared within the group.

The project evolved in line with the interests of the members with participants progressing to try new activities with encouragement from the curator. These included 'go and see' visits to the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art<sup>6</sup> in Gateshead and the Laing<sup>7</sup> Art Gallery in Newcastle upon Tyne and an over 50s group, 'The Recycled Teenagers' meeting to undertake arts activities.

### **Key challenges**

The project has addressed a number of challenges:

- Club politics, especially when linked to activities requiring or leading to organisational change within the club will impact upon the scheduling of arts activities;
- Arts engagement takes time and considerable support may be needed to achieve relatively small steps; and
- Ensuring the sustainability or legacy of the project with reduced or minimal ongoing support.

## **Outcomes and impact – what changed as a result?**

### **Project outcomes**

The project has provided a wealth of learning to inform bait's approach to utilising social clubs and similar venues as hubs for community-led arts activities. The project has provided the basis for a model which could be replicated or adapted to meet the needs and characteristics of other social clubs or community groups across South East Northumberland.

The partnership approach between Andrea, bait and Guidepost Social Club has also enabled the club to test an arts-focused diversification of its offer for its existing members. It has informed approaches to attract new users and members (figures show an increase from 200 to 600 members over the course of the project) with an aim of improving the club's financial stability.

The project has produced two successful yet contrasting artist residencies alongside a series of arts activities which in total have generated 265 participant engagements. It also supported an exhibition celebrating the people, history and heritage of the club at Woodhorn Museum visited by over 23,000 people.

The project also played a small, if unanticipated, role in supporting the club to create a reading room with PCs and internet access, benefiting from donations from businesses including AkzoNobel, Sage Software and Tees Music Alliance.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.balticmill.com/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://laingartgallery.org.uk/>

## Project impact

The Share has impacted upon a variety of different individuals and organisations through a multi-faceted approach delivered over a long term timeframe. The project has supported club members and the wider community to engage with a range of arts activities at their own pace and to varying intensities. Examples have ranged from being snapped by the photographer in residence Mik Critchlow to participating in pottery workshops with a ceramicist over several months.

Participation in the project has engendered a sense of pride and enjoyment amongst participants, in particular those from the 'Over 60s Bingo Club' that have worked with the ceramist Emilie Taylor. The project has developed new skills and reinvigorated interest in the arts by breaking down barriers to participation in a trusted setting.

**“You get a lot of satisfaction from knowing that you’re still capable of learning something new”**

Participants have expressed a range of positive reactions to the project, including gaining confidence in their ability to try new things and improving their skills with the support of professional artists. The progress made by the project is exemplified by the 'Over 60's Bingo Club' becoming known as the 'Potters Group' with other members latterly expressing an interest in joining as they realised what they were missing.

**“We didn’t think we could do what we did - Emilie made it easy”**

Participants working with the ceramist also recognised the wider benefits of their involvement - highlighting the impact of the project in improving their sense of wellbeing and preventing them from feeling socially isolated.

**“It lifts your spirits, give you something to get up for”**

**“People seem to really like the sense of community - the craic, the banter”**

The exhibition served to bring the individual arts activities delivered and the wider club together. Members were pleased with the way that the club and its culture had been portrayed and celebrated for others to enjoy. The artwork produced with the resident artists displayed alongside artefacts depicting the club's history had the effect of making people think about their involvement and relationship with the club within the wider community.

The project has gradually become more influential within the club, although this has been dependent on its relationship with key officials which has, at times, created some complexities. This relationship has become stronger and more inclusive overtime, with lessons learnt from activities that didn't work so well (e.g. a band night did not attract the numbers hoped for) and successes celebrated. The relationship also improved as the benefits of involvement with the project became clear and the delivery of arts activities became part of everyday life in the club.

## Legacy

- A key legacy of the project is the learning gained from developing a partnership with a CIU club and establishing a new community hub to support participation in the arts. As a result,

there is now a connection or relationship between the club, its members and bait/Woodhorn.

- The project has expanded the cultural horizons and practical skills of both officials and members of the club through a variety of arts activities delivered by quality artists. There is now a stronger desire within the club to try new arts activities as shown by involvement in a further project with bait and BALTIC to select artists in residents to work in the club.

- The project has helped to bring the club together and widen its outlook. The exhibition in particular raised the profile of the club and has contributed to expanding club membership<sup>8</sup>.

## Lessons learnt

Key areas of learning which can inform ongoing and similar activities across south east Northumberland include:

- The role of the curator within the project has been crucial in providing a bridge between the club, its members, commissioned artists and bait. The curator's knowledge of the role of social clubs within the community and potential future role has been integral to the success of the project.

## **“Andrea is the catalyst for the project being a success”**

- The project emphasises the need for time and persistence when looking to change perceptions of the arts within a group or ‘community’ such as the membership of a social club. It is important that the similar projects are delivered over a sufficient timeframe to enable key individuals to be engaged and relationships to be established.

- It is important to continuously reinforce the purpose of the project to key influencers within the club and to raise awareness amongst the wider membership on an ongoing basis.

- Understanding and harnessing the role and influence of strong individuals - both positive and negative and/or ‘project champions’ through joint decision making, determination and passion is crucial in supporting organisational change but also in engaging individual members.

- Developing an understanding of the often complex and sometimes insular relationships that govern the day-to-day running of a club can help to inform planning and determine the speed at which progress can be made.

- The project has highlighted the importance of the timing and quality of input from artists with the participatory skills or ‘core competencies’<sup>9</sup> to develop relationships with participants. The project has benefited from the careful selection of two artists able to build trust with ceramicist Emilie Taylor building on the work of photographer Mik Critchlow in integrating the project into the club. Each of the artists has created work which is sympathetic to, and crucially celebrates the people, history and heritage of the club.

- The project has emphasised the role of accessible art forms in engaging and empowering people with photographs depicting everyday club life thought to be particularly powerful. This familiar art form provided visitors to the exhibition, and club members in particular, with a sensitive yet accurate portrait of the club. The photos were stated to validate the club's involvement in the project, underlining its past and future role in the community.

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<sup>8</sup> The Guidepost Social Club membership has increased by approximately 200 to 600 over the course of the project however not all of this can be attributed directly to the project although officials recognise that it has played a part.

<sup>9</sup> See [http://www.creativescotland.com/\\_\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/26097/ArtWorks-Scotland-Skillsset-Research-Report-Oct-2012.pdf](http://www.creativescotland.com/___data/assets/pdf_file/0006/26097/ArtWorks-Scotland-Skillsset-Research-Report-Oct-2012.pdf) for a discussion of the skills, knowledge and qualities needed by artists to work effectively in different settings.

- Agreeing to engage with a project such as The Share requires all parties to be flexible. Social clubs will need to agree and adapt to artists working with members whilst artists will need to work with the club and potential participants in shaping a relevant programme of activities. The need for flexibility also extends to bait in terms of allowing changes to project plans and timescales in response to unanticipated issues as they arise.

- Linked to the need for flexibility, the project emphasises the need for a positive attitude to risk amongst funders, artists and participants in order to effect change. In the spirit of action learning, all stakeholders should learn from activities which do not work and be prepared to try again using a different approach.

## Replicability

The following are highlighted as top tips for replicating this project:

- Curators or 'agitator facilitators' able to collaborate with strong internal influencers spending time in clubs to enable members to share and develop existing and new arts skills.

- Identifying and establishing links with key influencers or champions for the project who can provide a link to the wider membership and sustain the project message in the absence of commissioned artists.

- The introduction of something 'new' into an environment underpinned by longstanding routine or rules will not be universally welcomed. Negativity from some quarters should be expected and overcome through positive examples of individual or organisational benefit of participation in the project.

- The exhibition in a professional gallery space was seen to provide a validation of both the role of the club in the community and the work produced as part of the project. The display of club artefacts and history served to bring further members into the project by utilising people's interest and pride in the club they support.

## Documentation

Film of The Share preview event (credit Jason Thompson):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qMR843dumLM&feature=youtu.be>



Above images: Life at Guide Post CIU credit: Mik Critchlow



Images: Above left, Crowds at The Share preview and Above right, (from left) Andrea Hawkins, Joyce Watts, Mik Critchlow, Emilie Taylor and John Watts credit: Jason Thompson

## Evidence of progress against Theory of Change

### **Ambition: to make a change in levels of participation in quality arts activity**

The Share at Guidepost Social Club has successfully established a relationship with a social club from which to base and promote a range of arts activities. The project has successfully increased participation in quality arts over a period of over 18 months, generating 265 participant engagements across a range of art forms. A further 23,066 people also visited the exhibition at Woodhorn Museum between June and October 2015.

The project has provided all members with the opportunity to diversify or broaden their participation through a suite of activities developed in partnership between the club, members and bait-commissioned artists. The project has reacted sensitively to the concerns of members by providing encouragement and support through a process of quality engagement.

Progression has been evident at an individual and overall club level with the development of new groups and new activities including the clubs active involvement in selecting artists for a BALTIC & bait artist residency<sup>10</sup>.

Although it is too early to assess the project's impact in terms of effecting long-term change in levels of arts participation in South East Northumberland, the project provides both an ongoing example and a model for future working. This model can be adapted to work with similar groups and similar settings using the learning points from The Share to increase participation across South East Northumberland.

### **Ambition: to involve local people**

Working Men's Clubs are distinctive in being owned by the members and therefore the local community. The Share therefore has, at its heart, the involvement of local people either in liaising with key contacts at the club or involving members in shaping and enjoying a range of arts activities. The project has built on this sense of community by working with close knit groups of people who have participated together, learnt together and laughed together within a familiar social setting.

The involvement of a local artist through the commissioning of a photographer in residence

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.balticmill.com/about/baltic-news/open-call-artist-residencies-in-south-east-northumberland>

from nearby Ashington also proved to be important. His proximity to, and interest in the club, enabled him to spend significant quality time on site - both with and without his camera, building relationships which other artists benefited from later in the project.

### **Ambition: to demonstrate the benefits to well-being of quality arts activity**

Participants reported a range of positive benefits linked to their involvement in the arts activities. People reported a sense of pride in their achievements which was heightened by those able to exhibit their work at Woodhorn Museum. Members of the 'Over 60s Bingo Club' in particular emphasised the fun and sense of community they enjoyed from working with the ceramist. The project has therefore helped to boost well-being and reduce social exclusion through a combination of the arts and social contact.<sup>11 12 13</sup>

### **Ambition: to leave a sustainable legacy of enhanced capacity, resources and infrastructure for the arts in south east Northumberland**

The project leaves a primary legacy in the evidence generated to inform a model for working with similar groups and venues in the future. It has worked hard to change mind sets within the club, creating potential for a great local venue for both the arts and wider activities with the opening up of a reading room with forthcoming funding bids to maximise its use and value to the community. However, the enthusiasm generated for the arts has required considerable curator and artist input

Researched and written by Consilium Research as part of the evaluation of bait (2015)  
[info@consiliumresearch.co.uk](mailto:info@consiliumresearch.co.uk) [www.consiliumresearch.co.uk](http://www.consiliumresearch.co.uk)

#### **Our Funders**



#### **Our Consortium**

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11 The Arts, Health and Wellbeing, Arts Council England, 2007 <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/phpC1AcLv.pdf>  
12 Devlin, P. (2010) 'Restoring the Balance: The effects of arts participation on wellbeing and health'. Voluntary Arts Network.  
13 Cutler, D. (2012) 'Tackling Loneliness in Older Age - The Role of the Arts'. Baring Foundation.