



PEOPLE'S HEALTH TRUST - ACTIVE COMMUNITIES CASE STUDY

# Full House - Art Town

## Introduction

This case study focuses on how the Art Town project was conceived, and what it aims to do and achieve, as part of the evaluation of the Active Communities Programme managed by People's Health Trust. The report draws on interviews with the project staff, volunteers and beneficiaries, observation of the group in session and the monitoring information submitted as part of the programme's six monthly review cycle.

## About the project

Full House Theatre is a Bedfordshire based arts organisation which aims to create artistic opportunities for children, young people and their families and to make a difference locally. Its projects include live

performances, youth groups, residences, and festivals in local venues such as theatres, arts centres, schools, libraries, museums and community spaces. Art Town was created in 2014 as a pilot project, when Full House successfully bid to People's Health Trust and the Royal Opera House Bridge. Following on from the success of the pilot in Houghton Regis, Art Town has now secured two years of additional funding from People's Health Trust under the Active Communities programme to continue the project and extend its reach into three neighbourhoods<sup>1</sup>.

Art Town's weekly sessions give children and young people who live in Houghton an opportunity to get involved in a wide range of creative activities and different art forms, as well as regular performances, arts

events, and creative summer sessions. There is also an aspiration to involve the community in the planning of the project using Community Ambassadors, which is designed to be a steering group for the project. Art Town was a new idea designed to fill a gap that exists in the local area for collective arts opportunities open to all young people regardless of their background and to inspire young people to do positive things in their local community.

Houghton Regis is a small town on the edge of Dunstable and Luton. The neighbourhoods which Full House targets for the project are the most economically disadvantaged in Houghton and young people who



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are at risk of poor educational attainment and social or emotional isolation. By working together with local people, the project aims to support young people to run the project themselves, and to respond to their needs and interests.

*"It's not just a drama club, it's about wanting to change local attitudes in the town about the arts in order to raise aspirations and make it a better place."* (Project staff)

## Main findings

- ➔ Through their engagement with the project, Arts Starters and Arts Leaders have improved their confidence, ambition and social interaction skills, which for some has been particularly significant in helping them to improve their mental health, personal development and employability. More widely, the project has created a sense of community as it is helping to change negative perceptions about young people in the local area, given that there are some young people who are helping to make a positive contribution to the local community.
- ➔ By working with and for the local community, the project is providing a range of ways for Community Ambassadors and Arts Leaders to contribute to project design and delivery. As a result Community Ambassadors and Arts Leaders feel able to have a say in how things are run and are satisfied with the amount of 'collective control' they have.
- ➔ Building on local contacts and knowledge of the community, the project team has designed a project that clearly meets the needs of children and young

people in Houghton Regis, and in doing so, has filled a gap in service provision. The project is building on its success by creating a Young Company which has significant potential to help facilitate longer term outcomes for young people in the local community.



## Who is involved?

Children and young people who live in Houghton are invited to attend weekly sessions which run during term time. There are two sessions, one for Arts Starters aimed at 7 to 12 year olds at Bedford Square Community Centre and one for Arts Leaders aimed at 13 to 19 year olds at the Memorial Hall.

Art Town attracts children and young people to the project through word of mouth, its network with local schools and its community events, shows and performances throughout the year to promote the project. In the early stages of the project it was useful to link up with the Houghton Network, to tap into the existing network of local voluntary organisations. Art Town also receives referrals from 4YP, a local youth work service that work with young people who are at risk of becoming NEETs.

Art Town aims to reach 45 regular attendees, and currently attracts around 20 to 25 young people of different ages and backgrounds each week, which reflects the diversity of the local community.

*"They want something positive to happen in the place where they live and want to make Houghton a more creative place. For a lot of them it's the first time they have experienced this sort of stuff, so they really enjoy it and want it to stay."* (Volunteer)

Many children attend regularly as Arts Starters because they enjoy the interactive nature of the sessions as well as learning about and experiencing different art forms as such puppetry, drama, dance, and productions. It is also an opportunity for them make friends with other children outside of school.

*"I like playing lots of games which involve interacting with everyone, which everyone can do. I especially like the new [work] booklets that we got as well as we have never done them before. I also like puppetry as well."* (Beneficiary)

For the Arts Leaders the focus is on skills in order to develop young people as artists and creatives, personal development, career development and employability. The Arts Leaders are peer mentors to the Arts Starters and they assist them in their productions with things such as with marketing, producing, costume and make up. During the pilot project, the Arts Leaders ran a Halloween themed and arts inspired workshop for children during the half term.

*"Arts Leaders are there to ensure that it doesn't become just artists from outside coming in to run the projects. There needs to be an upskilling of the community so that they can go on to develop their own projects."* (Project staff)

With the Trust's funding, a project manager was appointed who works 8 hours a week alongside a practitioner or artist that deliver the weekly Arts Starters sessions. They

are supported by volunteers who help out at the Arts Starters sessions, some of whom are also Arts Leaders who volunteer to work with the younger Arts Starters on a regular basis.



## What opportunities does the project offer?

Each new term a different practitioner / artist will lead the Arts Starters sessions as a way of offering the children a greater variety of experiences through working with a dance artist, puppet artist or performing artist etc.

*"I really like that we get to work with a different practitioner each half term, as different people have different artistic skills. Normally if you go to an arts group you would have the same person the whole time, but we had all kinds of art [forms] that do all kind of things. It's really helped the children as not only have they learnt about different artists, it has helped them to mature as it doesn't create a dependency on one practitioner."* (Beneficiary)

Bedford Square Community Centre is located where many of the children have easy access to and it offers a large space and safe environment where they can get involved in a variety of activities, games and tasks. The sessions also run at convenient times during the week for both the Arts Starters and the Arts Leaders.

*"There is a need to create a safe environment for young people to do positive activities and to make this a better place to live."* (Project staff)

The project staff highlighted that Arts Starters and Arts Leaders are working towards their Arts Award through Trinity College London and Arts Council England, which aims to inspire young people to develop their creativity, communication, planning, teamwork and leadership skills.

*"The Arts Award qualification is good as it allows you to evaluate what you have done and what you have learnt, it makes you think and you grow more as a person as you realise that you did this and you learnt this. So it really does help, without that aspect of Art Town, I don't think it would be as beneficial to the children. They all really enjoy doing their workbooks."* (Beneficiary)

The project provides a rare opportunity especially in an area like Houghton where limited opportunities for young people are available and where young people are viewed by the community and outsiders in a negative way.

*"Let just say, I would rather miss my two hours of golden time [at school] to come here, and that's time when we get to do anything."* (Beneficiary)

*"The community is so used to seeing and hearing about a lot of negative stuff. It's quite nice to see that people from Houghton are not like that and that they are doing positive things in their own community. I think that's made a real difference."* (Volunteer)

From the Arts Starters and Arts Leaders point of view, the project is receptive to requests - although they were keen to point out that they did not think much needed to change (aside from a request for the project

to open in school holidays and particularly the summer holidays when it is much missed).

*"I think they should extend it for half terms and summer holidays, but maybe do it in the summer holidays every other week. I think they should do it for an extra hour in the summer holidays, as you got more than 30 days off and you don't need to spend all your time inside watching TV and eating ice lollies."* (Beneficiary)



## What has the project achieved?

Through positive and sustained engagement with the project, Arts Starters and Arts Leaders have benefitted in many ways.

*"It's really nice knowing that there is a place for young people to go, which isn't hanging around on the streets and something which will help them in a positive way."* (Arts Leader)

For children attending the Art Town weekly sessions it has helped them to develop their confidence, ambition and social interaction skills. It has helped to develop their social networks, including new friendships that extend beyond their own school.

*"Some children don't really have the confidence to do other things. If my friend came here, she's not very good at interactive stuff, but I bet if I was here with some of our other friends, I bet she could make new friends and actually learn how to do some proper*

*stuff. I've made at least 5 to 6 new friends outside school and I'm not normally the type of person who makes new friends and now I've made lots of new friends."* (Beneficiary)

*"The good thing about Art Town is that you can just be yourself. I want to become an Arts Leader, and then I want to become like [one of the practitioners]."* (Beneficiary)

For some individuals, the project has been life changing. One of the Arts Leaders with depression described how Art Town has enabled her to get her life on track as it has helped her to gain confidence and to mature socially. Previously she had missed a lot of school because of her depression and had felt quite isolated as she didn't used to go out much. By being an Arts Leader she has gone on to achieve her bronze and silver Arts Awards. She has also gained a place at her local sixth form college, despite not achieving the 5 GCSEs required; her Arts Awards were recognised by the college as being equivalent to the one extra GCSE which she needed to get into college. Art Town has given her invaluable experience of developing her skills as a photographer, but through also working with young people has inspired her to become an art therapist. She is currently studying art, psychology, sociology, and health and social care, as well as working towards her gold Arts Award which is equivalent to one AS level, in order to help her get into university and to work towards becoming an art therapist.

She also volunteers at the Arts Starter sessions and has been given the role of working with one of the Arts Starters who has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), which means that she has taken on quite a lot of responsibility to support the Arts Starter to

complete their Art Award Discover certificate. She has also learnt about the safeguarding of children and how to communicate with younger children both through the weekly sessions and the art workshops she has delivered for different groups of children in the local area.

The interviews with the project staff and Arts Leaders also suggest that the project is demonstrating aspects of collective control (a key programme outcome), through collective action and some control over what activities are offered.

*"I was asked to write a piece for one of the funding applications, to give my point of view and my story... I had a lot of say on the location of the group and some of the activities which have happened."* (Beneficiary)



*"Watching older young people from Houghton, coming up with ideas and running activities for young children, that peer led stuff is a really rewarding thing to watch."* (Project staff)

*"There a mini creative community now. With the Arts Leaders they take their title quite seriously, they have become like a mini community arts development group and that's why I think they support the young ones so*

*well as they are seen as positive role models in the community."* (Project staff)

Finally, positive outcomes are evident throughout the wider community. In the pilot phase, the winter arts installation at the local library and the half term activities created a sense of closeness amongst the families who would not normally come together and join in with different activities. The footfall at the local library also significantly increased as a result of the winter arts installation.

*"It was quite brave for families to come to a walk in arts installation as they didn't know what it was, but they still engaged with it, which was really positive."* (Project staff)

## What has worked well?

➤ The quality and variety of activities on offer: the wide range of art practitioners and activities brought into the project based on young peoples' interests is a key factor in the project's success. The project also champions quality and always tries to find the best practitioners to work with the Arts Starters and Arts Leaders as a way of helping the project to raise young people's aspirations and to ensure that Art Town can be seen as a benchmark of quality.

➤ Collective control: local people's ideas are at the centre of this project. There was a lengthy six month community consultation phase in Houghton during the pilot phase where a post was created for a community producer to go to different community groups, school assemblies and Houghton Regis Network to identify where there

was appetite or need and to build on existing provision rather than starting from scratch. The Community Ambassadors are the voice of the community and through the Young Company, they will continue to develop and be empowered to lead and take ownership of project design, delivery and development.



- ➔ **Partnership with local councils:** The partnerships with local councils have strengthened through the course of the project. Houghton Regis Town Council's investment in the project is indicative of how supportive they are of Art Town. Whereas before the pilot the Council was slightly reticent about Art Town as it was hard for them to visualise what the project would actually look like or how it would work in practice.

## What are the challenges and how have these been overcome?

- ➔ **Partner referrals:** referrals from 4YP have not really worked well, as the young people who were being referred did not have an interest in art and did not want to engage with the project. Although Art Town is open to all children and young people, and does not turn anyone away, it is not set up to be a youth service project. The social and behavioural problems of some of these young people

compromised the safety of the Arts Starters that wanted to be there to make a difference. Art Town now has an ongoing dialogue with 4YP to only accept referrals for young people that express a keen interest in arts and creative activities. Although young people from 4YP are not actively engaged in the weekly sessions, they are still engaged in Art Town as part of the creative summer sessions.

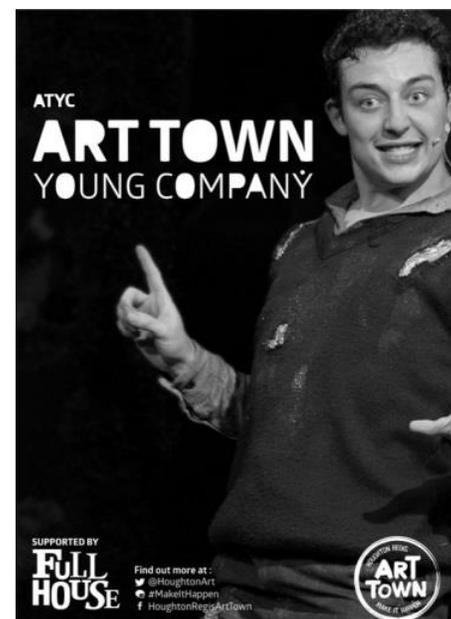
- ➔ **Context:** there are lots of challenges working in Houghton, mainly because of where it is situated. It is very close to Luton, so many young people from Houghton would tell people that they are from Luton rather than Houghton. Art Town is all about making young people proud of their community and to make it a better place. Young people from Houghton do not get the benefits of Luton's creative infrastructure or investment in large scale community arts initiatives such as Luton Creates, a Creative People and Places programme funded by Art Council England, and that's why initiatives like Art Town are so important, so that the local people of Houghton do not feel that they have been left behind or forgotten about.

## The future

Full House's vision of Art Town is to ensure that the project is sustained long term beyond People's Heath Trust funding and that local people are continually empowered to lead and take ownership of the project. It is currently in the early stages of creating a Young Company, which is led by young volunteers (aimed at 14 to 25 year olds), with 'light touch' support from Full House. The Young Company aims to raise the profile of



Houghton by creating a mini-tour of a show or series of workshops with an inter-generational focus, where young people will have the opportunity to work with older people at local day centres, care homes and community centres etc. The inter-generational activities will be informed by what older people say they are interested in. The Young Company has significant potential to help facilitate longer term outcomes for young people in the local community.



## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Full House has recently requested to increase Art Town to five neighbourhoods (all defined as 'fundable' by People's Health Trust), to reach beneficiaries from all parts of Houghton Regis.