



People's Health Trust - Active Communities Case Study



Full House - Art Town

Introduction

People's Health Trust believes in a world without health inequalities. The Trust funds small and local projects in neighbourhoods that are most affected by health inequalities with funding generated through The Health Lottery. Active Communities is one of its funding programmes and grants aim to support people to create or shape local projects that will help their community or neighbourhood to become even better, and require local people to design and run these projects. Typically lasting up to two years, the grants are between £5,000 and £50,000 for each project. The programme's main intended outcomes are:

- **Collective Control:** Ideas designed and led by local people. Regular participation of residents, who are empowered to lead and take ownership of the project design, delivery and development.
- **Social links and ties:** Stronger connections between people. Decreased social isolation and loneliness, and improved connection, friendships and collective support networks among participants.

As part of the 2016 Active Communities programme evaluation, Ecorys visited Full House, Art Town to find out how it was established and run and what difference it made to local residents. Two further visits in summer and autumn 2017 explored the project's achievements and changes over time. This drew on interviews with the people involved and monitoring reports to People's Health Trust.

Key facts

HealthCourage

Central Bedfordshire Health Community Interest Company (CIC) area

£49,917 of People's Health Trust funding

Main activities

A local community arts initiative for young people and children take part in creative sessions, performances and arts events

Key outcomes

- Improved social links and ties
- Increased confidence, knowledge, skills and assets
- Collective action and control



About the project

Since 2001, Full House Theatre has been creating and producing professional performances and outreach projects for young people and their families in Bedfordshire. In 2014, People's Health Trust funded the setup of Art Town, which provides weekly sessions to give children and young people who live in Houghton Regis the opportunity to get involved in a wide range of creative activities and art forms, as well as regular performances, arts events, and creative half-term sessions. 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 take part in positive activities in their local community.

There are two weekly sessions, one for Arts Starters aimed at 7 to 12 year olds and one for Arts Leaders aimed at 13 to 19 year olds. There is also an opportunity for the Arts Leaders to be involved in the Young Company, where young people are empowered to lead and take ownership of the activities of the Young Company. Art Town provides opportunities for the community to be involved in the planning and delivery of the Art Town by appointing Community Ambassadors who act as the steering group for the project.

The Active Communities funding has enabled the project to work together with a range of arts professionals and Community Ambassadors to respond to the needs and interests of local people in the area. Over time, Art Town has supported young people to increase their personal wellbeing, raised their confidence and aspirations and empowered them to become more involved with the project and the local community.

How are local people shaping and leading the project?

Offering opportunities to shape and lead activities through the Young Company and Community Ambassadors has proved to be the most successful way of giving young people a sense of ownership over this project. At the start, there were opportunities for participants to have a say in the activities they were involved with each time they attended. There were also regular Community Ambassadors meetings that led on some decisions, and two of the Community Ambassadors regularly facilitated the weekly sessions. Over time, both the Community Ambassadors and Young Company have become increasingly involved in shaping and leading the project informally by sharing their ideas. In this way, decision-making opportunities have become an everyday part of planning and coordinating the sessions.

The Arts Leaders involved in the Young Company have devised, developed and delivered a number of short films and performances. The Arts Leaders have also contributed to the future planning and sustainability of the project through the Young Company and were involved in Art Town's Arts Award Access Funding application.

What has the project achieved?

Improved social links and ties

A positive shared outcome for Arts Leaders has been the development of **new friendships and social connections** based on shared interests:

"Often, we have kids come to us saying that they don't feel that they fit in at school, but when they come to Art Town, it really is a level playing field. There's no hierarchy, it really is accessible; it really is inclusive. Kids come there, they make friends, they develop friendships."

(Project lead)



“Before coming here, I didn’t have many friends, but coming here made it easier for me to meet people who had the same interests.” (Participant)

The importance of these new and strengthened friendships was evident for participants as it has given them an opportunity to interact with people outside of their normal social networks, including young people of **different ages and backgrounds**. Arts Leaders spoke positively about their experience making new friends with a wide range of different people from both within and outside of their school:

“It’s good to be able to make friends which aren’t your own age. You guys are all in Year 11, [C] is Year 9, I’m in Year 13, and [K] is in Year 8. So we’re all friends, but we’re all different.” (Participant)

After getting to know each other at the sessions, participants found they have many things in common. Over time, many Arts Leaders, particularly those who attend regularly, have developed friendships based on **trust and mutual understanding**:

“It was so nice to know [C], as I was literally just finished my GCSEs and I was going to [C] for advice all the time.” (Participant)

“When I first joined, I was so nervous. But now I’ve met new friends and built on my friendships, things have got better... With acrobatics, we learnt to build our trust in each other and [learnt] a lot about teamwork.” (Participant)

The interviews demonstrated that Art Town offers a safe and inclusive environment, which allows young people to engage in inspiring and productive activities, supported by positive adult role models:

“Often, we have kids come to us saying that they don’t feel that they fit in at school, but when they come to Art Town, it really is a level playing field. There’s no hierarchy, it really is accessible; it really is inclusive. Kids come there, they make friends, they develop friendships... So we are able to provide an environment that gives the kids opportunities that they wouldn’t usually have.” (Project lead)

Through developing new friendships, participants have also begun to feel a greater sense of **belonging** within the community.

“I’ve made friends outside of school. Friends that I wouldn’t have met otherwise. It also makes me more proud of Houghton Regis.” (Participant)

Art Town has also been particularly beneficial for participants living with a **mental health** related conditions such as anxiety, depression or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), which was also clear at the first visit.

“I wouldn’t be the same person, had I not stepped into Art Town. It’s boosted my social skills massively and my confidence too.” (Participant with an anxiety disorder)

Art Town’s Young Company has also helped to promote **intergenerational understanding** and connections between young and older people, especially through their Memory Lane show at Red Court House. The show celebrated the differences and similarities of local residents’ lives



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across the generations. There was positive feedback from older residents that the Arts Leaders had helped them to change the way they viewed young people.

“Really great to see young people doing something like this. To see young people doing something positive for the community for a change.” (Local resident)

“We did a performance for older people, and we toured around local places in Houghton Regis for different people which was fun. It was nice to see people appreciate what we were doing... I remember talking to one older lady, [who said] it was nice to see there were things young people can get involved in as it doesn't normally happen.” (Participant)

Increased confidence, knowledge, skills and assets

The new friendships and support networks developed through the project have encouraged participants to develop greater **self-confidence** in themselves and in their abilities, helping to raise their **aspirations**. Project staff noted they had seen Arts Leaders grow in confidence and improve their skills.

“Definitely confidence, one hundred percent. They [the Arts Leaders] have so much pride in themselves and the work that they are achieving here; they all achieved an Arts Award. I think it's given them all such a boost. Especially now they're even more involved in the shaping of the project.” (Project staff)

Arts Leaders have also noticed a positive change in their self-confidence, which has inspired participants to **take action and take the lead**.

“I found that it really built up my confidence. Leadership skills as well, for when you're leading different workshops. I feel like it helps a lot with keeping your own self-belief, as when you are more confident and willing to do things, you put yourself out there more and that really helps.” (Participant)

“You can definitely see where individuals that have been coming to us for a while now have developed in confidence and put themselves forward more. [They are] trying new things and developing their skills.” (Project lead)

Collective action and control

The follow-up visit highlighted the extent to which the project had **empowered individuals to lead and to take ownership** of project activities. For example, Arts Leaders have taken on writing scripts, developing storylines and characters and designing and producing performances for the Young Company. Arts Leaders are vocal in **bringing different ideas** to the group, sharing their opinions on possibilities suggested by others and in coming together to make things happen.

“We're taking part in events for the community, like 'Feb Fest' in Luton. We could basically choose whatever we wanted to do for our workshops. So, because I like photography, I ran a photoshoot for the kids... That was good.” (Participant).

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(Participant)



“At the start, we did quite a lot of drama. So we made suggestions to step away from that for a while. We love drama, but we wanted to try something new. So we did puppetry, we made short films, then we held dance [classes] and some community events.” (Participant)

“For the Arts Leaders, I’ve noticed that they’re much more open to discussing and expressing themselves, whether it’s related to the sessions or not. They know they have a voice and they can use it. That’s the kind of change that I’ve seen in them collectively.” (Volunteer)

Longer-term outcomes

The follow-up visit demonstrated some wider outcomes in relation to increased support for **educational achievements** and increased **employability** because of the opportunities, which the project has presented them. For example, Full House has mentored and supported a Community Ambassador and a project staff member (a former Arts Leader and Community Ambassador) through Art Town, which has since enabled them to make a successful application to Arts Council England’s Grants for the Arts to start their own production company.

“Without Art Town and doing workshops for little kids, I wouldn’t have studied childcare in my course. Now that I’ve got a nursery placement, I’m thinking about going to university to get a degree in teaching.” (Participant)

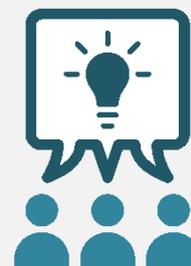
“We feel that we’ve really made a positive contribution to the town in offering these opportunities for qualifications, volunteering and taking part in the arts. That side of it will hopefully have a longer-term impact.” (Project lead)

“I think people see Art Town as part of the community now. I think the whole ethos of the project being about raising aspiration and people seeing how Houghton Regis is a place for the arts and arts being for them, I think all of that helps the community.” (Project staff)

“The community is a lot more aware of the project - we have been building our networks in Houghton Regis. We’ve also worked hard at building a relationship with one of the care homes we’re doing a project with, and we’re supporting them with the event that they want to run. So [Art Town is] definitely part of the community, because of those networks.” (Project staff)

Project staff have established **links and ties** with many of the local schools and community groups in Houghton Regis, which will be beneficial for future joint activities.

“One school has asked us to come in and do a presentation for their Arts Awards, which they are delivering to their year eight students. We’ve [also] had a primary school ask whether we can come in and do a workshop. Houghton Regis Helpers, who are a community based group of volunteers, approached us about a potential intergenerational project that they would like to do.” (Project staff)



“I had to lead my session for my Arts Award, and when it comes to big projects I’m not intimidated by people anymore. I’m not afraid to take control. It’s made me feel more confident in group work at school too.”

(Project staff)

Charlotte's story

For Charlotte, Art Town has been life changing. The project has enabled her to get her life back on track after experiencing depression, as it has supported her to gain confidence and develop her social skills. Before joining Art Town, she had missed a lot of school because of her depression and she felt quite isolated socially as she did not go out much. Being an Arts Leader enabled her to achieve her bronze and silver Arts Awards. She also gained a place at her local sixth form college, despite not achieving the number of GCSEs required, as her Arts Awards were recognised by the college as being equivalent to an extra GCSE. Working with the Arts Starters has inspired her to become an art therapist, and she has learnt about the safeguarding of children and how best to communicate with younger age groups.

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(Participant)

What has worked well?

- ➔ **Working with professional arts practitioners and Community Ambassadors:** A key factor in the project's success was in its recruitment of local people and art practitioners to plan and facilitate the sessions. The Community Ambassadors have been able to pass on their artistic skills and expertise to the participants and to facilitate activities based on young people's interests. This enabled participants to experiment with a range of different art forms.
- ➔ **The quality and variety of activities on offer:** Another of the project's successes is its high level of retention, demonstrating the project's value to participants through its wide range of arts practitioners and activities. As the participants enjoy and gain a lot from the activities and sessions, most participants attend the session every week and some have been coming for years.

"I think it's good to be able to do so many different art forms in one group. Normally, you'd have to go to a drama group or a photography group, but we get to do it all in one and it's good to be able to experiment. And they get different professionals in as well, so it's not like it's just one teacher. They'll get in someone who knows about it, so we actually get professional expertise." (Participant)

- ➔ **Community engagement activities:** Throughout the year, Art Town is present within the community, hosting events, shows and workshops which makes a valuable contribution to the variety of local activities on offer locally. For example, Memory Lane, a show that presents the stories of Houghton Regis' older residents through the eyes of Art Town Young Company.



What are the lessons?

- **Barriers to participation:** After consulting with the participants, project staff decided to move Art Town to a new venue at a local primary school.. The new venue offers participants a safe environment and engaging atmosphere that is valued and inspires others to get involved. Project staff have established a good relationship with the school, which will be beneficial for future joint activities.
- **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.
- **Understanding the context of the local area:** 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 like they have been left behind or forgotten about.



The future

Through the project, Full House has established a good relationship with local partners, including Houghton Regis Town Council, Houghton Regis Helpers and Red Court Home, which will be important for the sustainability of Art Town. Full House has secured a small grant for Art Town from Ernest Cook Trust and Houghton Regis Town Council to continue some of the activities into the first term of 2018. Full House also re-applied to People's Health Trust for continuation funding for Art Town for another two years, through the Active Communities programme. Their successful application means the project will continue to February 2020, and they will now look to include activities for children aged four and up.

“Feedback from local families is that they would really like the opportunity to have younger family members get involved. At the moment we start from age seven, but we did some workshops in October that were from age four and they were really popular, and we've had people asking about whether we'd be able to offer pre-school sessions as well. I think, moving forward, that's something that we definitely want to consider - being able to extend that age range.” (Project lead)



