
Developing and delivering high quality participatory arts practice in Torbay

Project aims

The overarching aim of the PHF Funded ArtWorks CPD project (hereafter referred to as 'the CPD project') was to pilot a CPD model comprising practice development workshops, structured reflective conversations and peer support in order to debate and develop quality for delivery of better experiences for participants.

The CPD project was overseen by the Torbay Culture Board, responsible for the delivery of Torbay's new Cultural Strategy *Enjoy, talk, do, be* established to harness the value of culture and create the conditions in which it will thrive in the Bay, supporting circumstances for the sharing of knowledge, skills and resources by individuals and organisations.

A further aim, therefore, was to bring together all the participatory artists in Torbay and involve commissioners in a place-based cultural commissioning development context, focusing on creating a more coherent and confident sector.

In order to maximise opportunity, the delivery timetable for the CPD project was interwoven with a NCVO Cultural Commissioning Locality Project to enhance and add value to both:

- The Locality Project, one of only five such projects in England, provided a mutual opportunity for artists to develop their awareness understanding and readiness to undertake commissions, and for commissioners to develop their knowledge, appreciation of and willingness to commission artists to deliver their public sector outcomes.
- This CPD project focused on the practice itself, building on existing informal peer learning amongst artists, contributing to the ambition to develop an outstanding participatory arts resource in Torbay.

What we did

The CPD project invited all participatory artists and arts organisations known to reside in, or working in Torbay to participate in six contact sessions and extension ‘buddying’ activities.

With acknowledgement that the majority of practitioners invited are freelancers and can’t often afford dedicated time and space for CPD, a small honorarium was offered to non-salaried artists for session attendance.

There was no limit to the number of practitioners welcomed to take part and there was no cut off date for participation. Although session dates were timetabled with practitioners via the online platform ‘Doodle-Poll’, participation was often predicated on availability. Sessions were attended by between 7–11 participants. 15 practitioners participated in total, of which 2 had availability to attend every session scheduled.

The 6 contact sessions proposed comprised an introductory session, three ‘doing and talking’ workshops, one workshop involving commissioners and a final sharing and evaluation session. The CPD project was committed to being artist-led to ensure that the programme tests a CPD model relevant to participants and the Torbay context. An introductory session in September outlined the parameters of the project as funded, and artists were invited to make suggestions toward the development of session content. Some of this conversation took place in the session itself with further discussion taking place via email.

As a key objective of the CPD project was for practitioners to share and understand each other’s practice there was a keenness for immersive, reflective and practice based CPD. As the majority of participants were established practitioners (three had been working in community settings for 30+ years, two for 20+ years and two for 15+ years) most participants agreed that sessions could be planned and facilitated from within the group rather than bringing in external facilitation from elsewhere.

Session content was therefore regularly ‘reviewed and refined’ through email discussion as a means to democratise approach and ensure that sessions remained relevant and inclusive. This process was supported by an external project manager/facilitator to safeguard that proposed activity did not stray too far outside of the project’s initial parameters but with recognition that ‘not everything goes to plan’ and that session content would develop as a result of the issues revealed through practise.



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As a result, the following activities took place:

- **Introductory session (1.5 hrs):** Convened to review and refine the programme aims and schedule.
- **CPD Workshop 1 and 2 combined (12 hrs):** In which practitioners ran an experiential session/activity/invitation as an introduction to their practice, made a creative response, engaged in discussion and shared practice over an evening meal.
- **CPD Workshop 3 (4 hrs):** A practice based ‘open space’ in which practitioners shared a line of enquiry that were then explored through a participatory activity developed by session participants.
- **CPD Workshop 4 (6 hrs):** A practical ‘call and response’ session in which practitioners invited peers to be ‘co-devisors’ around a current issue they are grappling with.
- **Buddying (minimum 1 hr):** An opportunity for participants to enter into ‘buddying’ partnerships, whether that be shadowing, peer to peer project observation, acting as a critical friend or mentoring.
- **Evaluation session (4 hrs):** A facilitated session to summarise what happened, reflect on learning and consider what could happen next.

In order to collect documentation materials, practitioners set up a closed Facebook page. This soon became a collecting place for images, thoughts and words and links to audio content produced during the session. It is anticipated that a selection of materials from this resource will be used in the production of a slide show to compliment this case study.

What the project achieved

The most significant outcome identified through evaluation was that the CPD project helped build relationships and create conditions for collaboration with other practitioners. It was commented that the programme has *“created a sense of connectedness with the group”* that *“understanding other people’s practice and way of working has made desire to work with them much stronger”* and that it was *“interesting and stimulating because we got to understand a little about each other by working side by side to create...”*. Several practitioners commented that they are developing closer working relationships as a result of this practice-based programme.

Under the auspices of the NCVO Locality Project the practitioners had co-authored a document entitled *'What can arts and culture offer?'* as the 'Torbay Arts and Culture Network'. It was commented that the CPD project's focus on enabling participants to meet through practice rather than across a table created a greater sense of trust and solidarity between practitioners and a confidence in advocating for the sector via an emerging network. *"I am more aware of what we can offer individually and collectively as part of Torbay Arts and Culture Network... this process has catalysed and solidified [the] network in potential to lead on projects as a consortium."* *"I enjoyed the fact that the CPD ran alongside the NCVO process... we have been evolving as a network behind the front door..."*.

Greatly valuing the luxury of being a participant and being led by others in creative refreshment, some practitioners' experimentation resulted in the crystallisation of ideas to take forward and enabled some to develop new project ideas.

Outputs

Over the course of the CPD Project:

- 15 practitioners participated in one or more CPD sessions.
- 27.5 hours of group CPD was delivered across 6 sessions between Sept 2015 – Feb 2016.
- 12 practitioners participated in 6 'buddying' partnerships.
- 1 online documentation repository was established on Facebook, to which there are 18 members.
- 1 practical workshop for approximately 30 commissioners is in planning, to take place in April 2016.

Lessons learned

Practitioners identified the following to have 'worked well':

- **Meeting through action rather than words:** getting out of the meeting room and into a creative space with 'hands on' activities.
- **Sharing practice:** actually experiencing each person's way of approaching creativity, learning other approaches, working with others from different artistic backgrounds.
- **Having an open framework:** The chance to talk in detail with no major agenda, the lack of 'tick-box' enquiry.



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- **Peer-to-peer:** Having rare time to share and discuss the highs and lows of this type of work with people who can empathise.
- **Co-facilitating:** Co-facilitating sessions enabled individuals to both lead and be led.
- **Being paid:** Making time for CPD can mean missing a whole day's paid work which can't often be afforded by freelance practitioners. Being paid even a small amount increased participation.

What 'didn't work so well':

- **Finding the time:** Making the time for an intensive CPD programme that demanded thought, planning and reflection out of sessions. Not being able to attend all sessions or having to cancel at short notice due to work commitments was frustrating as variable attendance inhibited consistency of the group. In future, sessions should be planned at least 6 weeks in advance, however this doesn't mitigate late cancellation due to the offer of paid work.
- **Planning via email:** The weight of emails filled inboxes and were difficult to keep track of. It was suggested that those who had more capacity to keep on top of emails seemed to have more influence on planned sessions.

- **Co-facilitating:** Whilst some found the strategy of co-facilitating valuable to helping create a safe environment, others would have preferred to have an external facilitator to hold the session and balance the group dynamics. Even those who were positive about co-leadership agreed that it was like ‘wading through treacle’ to decide direction and undertake planning, with 2 or 3 people taking most of the strain.
- **Potential exclusion:** There was awareness that practitioners who had not participated in early sessions might have the perception that they would not be able to ‘break in’ to later ones. There was some confusion as to whom the invitation to participate had been sent, and whether this was fully inclusive.
- **Conflict of purpose:** Some would have preferred more discursive sessions in which core topics such as ‘quality’ were more overtly tackled. Others commented that the tendency to want to ‘evaluate’ subjective experience was neither possible nor valuable to the practitioners.
- **Lack of ‘rules of engagement’ when testing boundaries:** Some practitioners found participating in sessions extremely challenging at times, particularly when working in an unfamiliar art form that pushes boundaries. It was commented that there was discussion about physical breakages, but not emotional ones – that with hindsight the group should have created strategies to look after each other better. Whilst some relished the opportunity to test their boundaries, others felt very vulnerable.

At the mid-point of the project it was agreed that it would not be appropriate to deliver a practical session for commissioners in CPD workshop 4 as was detailed in the initial grant application. This followed a meeting with commissioners as part of the NCVO Locality Project at which practitioners felt that more work needed to be done to establish a better relationship with the commissioners before taking this step. Whilst the aim of the workshop was to enable commissioners to experience first-hand, and therefore better understand, arts participation to generate dialogue about the principles and conditions for quality, this needed to be balanced with a sense that both parties were ready to meet in this way; anything other than a good experience for the commissioners had the potential to create more harm than good.

Shortly after this decision was taken, practitioners launched a new document ‘*What can arts and culture offer?*’ at a second meeting of the NCVO Locality Group before discussing priority areas for potential cultural engagement to deliver outcomes. A ‘hands on’ session has now been planned to take place at the upcoming seminar ‘Culture, Health and Wellbeing: Creative Commissioning for Better Outcomes’ to be held in Torbay in April 2016 to which 30 commissioners will participate in one of three cultural activities and engage in discussion about application. Planning and delivery of this session to ensure that it is most suitably pitched will be supported by this CPD budget.

What is happening next?

The Torbay Culture Board is developing an application to Arts Council England for funds to deliver the second phase of the Cultural Strategy and it is proposed to build in support for this fledgling network as part of the bid.

Practitioners see value in a network that:

- presents a 'front door' to commissioners for access to cultural delivery, advocating the networking and brokering opportunities for joint working and consortium bids;
- delivers a CPD programme 'behind the door' that utilises skilled network members to lead workshop activity four times a year and that investigates key topics;
- has access to rehearsal space and an admin hub, free to members at the point of use.

As part of evaluation practitioners were asked to imagine they were in a car, driving away from the CPD experience. One practitioner describes the image they see reflected in the rear-view mirror:

"A group of artists/organisations stating their offer standing outside a fantastic cultural hub, on a large visual designed 'map' of Torbay, many lines of bright coloured lights linking them to each other, local people and placed. Sounds of sea, municipal singing, sense of openness and potential." Torbay Arts & Culture Network member

More Information:

Kate Farmery, Executive Director of Torbay Culture Board

kate.farmery@tedcltd.com

www.torbayculture.org