



EAST DURHAM CREATES

**CREATIVE  
AND  
PEOPLE  
PLACES**

**NON-ARTS PARTNERSHIPS**



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## CASE STUDY THEME

> Non-arts partnerships

## PROJECT SUMMARY

East Durham Creates (EDC) is a programme of arts and cultural activity across East Durham. The original aims of the project were to develop an appetite for high quality arts activity; create a legacy by building the up the capacity of the public to run their own creative projects; and experiment with a range of approaches to identify the most successful ways of engaging people in high quality art.<sup>1</sup>

EDC is one of 21 Creative People and Places (CPP) programmes funded by Arts Council England, and in phase one, from 2014 to February 2017, has been delivered by a consortium comprised of Forma (an organisation of creative producers), East Durham Trust and led by Beamish (an open air museum in Country Durham), supported by the East Durham Area Action Partnership (EDAAP) and Durham County Council. As the area covered is large, with communities being geographically isolated, East Durham Trust's role in the partnership - as a trusted organisation running projects to fight disadvantage across the area - was to broker relationships between EDC and the communities and to help to embed activities into the local community.

Drawing on interviews with staff from EDC and East Durham Trust, the project's critical friend and a member of the community panel, this case study focuses on how the non-arts partnership between EDC and East Durham Trust functioned, as well as the key outcomes of the programme including what worked well or less well and the main lessons that have been learned.

<sup>1</sup> East Durham Creates. Business Plan Executive Summary plus Artistic Programme  
<http://collections.beamish.org.uk/downloads/EastDurhamCreatesExecutiveSummary171213.pdf>



Photo: Jess Hunt 'Go and See' Jack and the Beanstalk at the Gala Theatre

## KEY FINDINGS

- › As a non-arts partner, East Durham Trust has added value to EDC in that it has been able to utilise its substantial community ambassadors and networks – as well as its strong reputation – to engage people who do not regularly engage in the arts to take part in the activities offered by the project.
- › EDC has also added value to East Durham Trust's work by raising awareness of the organisation's wider projects during the arts activities and events. From hearing about East Durham Trust through these activities, more people have been able to access their services.
- › Although EDC began with an artistically outstanding and ambitious season of activities and events, attracting over 10,000 audience members, there was a perception amongst the public and some of the stakeholders that these activities had not engaged people as much as initially anticipated. By drawing more closely on the expertise of each of the partners, the subsequent activities focused more on engaging and empowering people whilst working with artists or leading their own activities. This led to increased confidence among community groups to lead and shape activities as well as participants having a better understanding about the arts and a greater knowledge of the infrastructure in the area.
- › Action learning has been pivotal to the success of EDC, as the team has been able to quickly identify what works well and less well across the project. It has allowed the consortium to experiment with different approaches and test assumptions to understand the most effective ways of engaging people in their area, as well as acknowledge lessons learned and identifying good practice.



## INTRODUCTION

Photo: Richard Kenworthy, The Barn in Easington, Let's Create 'Mayhem in the Garden'

East Durham is an area of high deprivation, with 23.9% of the population living in the top 10% most deprived Lower Layer Super Output Areas in England.<sup>2</sup> As a former mining community, it has struggled economically since the decline of the coal industry and the closure of the collieries, as well as the railway industry which was heavily impacted by the decline of the mining industry. The area is vast and is unique in that it is comprised of many small former mining villages with their own centres and venues which can be utilised for community activities. However, the public transport infrastructure is limited, meaning it can be difficult for people to travel across the area with ease. Those interviewed commented that the geography of East Durham is different to many of the other CPP areas, in that the communities are quite isolated, with relatively high proportions of people with long-term mental and physical health problems, low income and an ageing population. Given the relatively high levels of deprivation, there has been a long-standing history of investment coming into the area - often comprised of short-term grants or regeneration initiatives, instead of lasting infrastructure investments - and rather than making lasting, positive change, communities have felt that the funding has often failed to meet expectations and has only scratched the surface of issues in the area.

Prior to CPP, there was very little arts infrastructure in terms of venues and events. However, one of the consortium partners East Durham Trust – had a membership of 325 group, of which some had interest in the arts realm, such as painting, drawing and musical groups and choirs. The stakeholders interviewed felt these were disjointed and at times insular groups before CPP, and as a result had not engaged a large number of people in their activities. In addition, there had been a change to local authority arts and cultural provision, which meant that when the CPP funding was announced, there was a general misunderstanding by the public that it was in lieu of council funding. Stakeholders felt that the general attitude towards the arts before CPP was that while it has its benefits, it's mainly something that's 'good for the kids'. The challenge for EDC, therefore, was to engage a wide range of people who may have thought the arts wasn't for them.

EDC is managed through a consortium approach, led by Beamish in partnership with East Durham Trust and Forma, with support from Durham County Council and EDAAP. As a non-arts partner, East Durham Trust is a charity which addresses poverty in areas of high deprivation across East Durham. During the early bid development phase, East Durham Trust was keen to be a key part of the consortium bid, working alongside Durham County Council to identify Beamish as the lead and Forma - as experienced creative producers – as the third partner. Although East Durham Trust is not an arts organisation, they recognised that being involved in an arts programme like CPP would be a mechanism to engage hard-to-reach people in East Durham; getting them out and involved in the community, enabling East Durham Trust to access them and support them in other ways.

<sup>2</sup> Durham County Council. 2015. Indices of Deprivation 2015.

[http://content.durham.gov.uk/PDFRepository/Index\\_of\\_Deprivation\\_2015\\_Factsheet.pdf](http://content.durham.gov.uk/PDFRepository/Index_of_Deprivation_2015_Factsheet.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> East Durham Creates. 2015. Proposal.

**“We’re always on the lookout for initiatives and moves that would help to achieve our overall objectives and values.”** East Durham Trust

Non-arts partnerships are therefore at the core of the EDC project, not only with East Durham Trust as a key delivery partner, but also with EDAAP, which has its own priority groups around maintaining the social fabric of society; health, mental health and wellbeing; and children and young people. EDAAP's role throughout EDC was to assist with community engagement activities by linking councillors and community group networks, as well as securing funding.<sup>4</sup>

## APPROACH TO NON-ARTS PARTNERSHIPS

When EDC was conceived, the mission statement was around bringing world-class artists to the community, to develop new pieces of art for the area. Essentially, the idea was to ensure that East Durham would become well-known for its arts provision.

**“The long term vision was about making this a cultural destination.”** EDC

In addition, a key objective of the project was to support and encourage ongoing engagement with the arts, primarily through community activities and involvement, supported by a network of volunteers acting as ‘Cultural Champions’. The community engagement aspect built on East Durham Trust’s existing work to engage hard-to-reach people, with their business model focusing on engaging people through ‘welfare’ or ‘health’ champions. This model has worked successfully in the past and it helps to build up trust between East Durham Trust and its beneficiaries, so that the latter are more inclined to continue to engage with the support provided. Given the high levels of deprivation in East Durham and the number of people living with multiple and complex needs, this sort of approach is necessary to ensure that hard-to-reach people will engage.

**“We take projects on board, we do them through community groups, we do them through volunteers; we always include volunteering in everything we do.”** East Durham Trust

Therefore, East Durham Trust’s role in EDC was primarily to raise awareness of the activities taking place and encourage people to attend or participate in them. One community leader that was interviewed commented that it was the natural decision for East Durham Trust to lead on the community engagement aspect of the project, as they have significant links across the East Durham area.

**“Everybody has had some involvement with East Durham Trust or they know who East Durham Trust are; they are respected as well.”** Local community leader

<sup>4</sup> East Durham Creates. 2016. *Our Partners*.  
[www.eastdurhamcreates.co.uk/about/our-partners](http://www.eastdurhamcreates.co.uk/about/our-partners)

EDC's artistic programme launched in the autumn of 2014 with an ambitious 20 day programme of activities including art, performance, music and theatre. The initial plan was to deliver five 'seasons' or 'festivals' of arts activities, where each season would begin with working in the community and would culminate in a large festival that would showcase that season's activities. After the first festival, EDC decided to conduct a review with the consortium partners, taking an action learning approach in response to feedback from communities and beneficiaries.

After the review, EDC changed the programme management and delivery structure to an approach with three strands so that each of the partners' roles were clearer and better defined as opposed to their roles in the initial programme of events. East Durham Trust was to lead the first strand, which would be around audience development and community engagement. East Durham Trust's existing business model focuses on utilising local community groups and volunteers who act as a link for accessing hard-to-reach audiences. Their strand of work was to encourage grassroots activities to develop audiences, and embed the activity in other, non-EDC work strands such as their 'ChitChat' and 'Debt Advisors' services, to provide further support to their existing clients.

The activities that East Durham Trust were to deliver as part of the second phase of EDC were best suited to their expertise and included delivering Go and Sees (which involved taking hard-to-reach people to new cultural events and venues); managing the Let's Create commissioning fund (funding that supports local people to create design and lead their own arts activities); managing the Creative Social (an initiative offering support for non-traditional arts groups to host events featuring creative activity and food, designed to increase participation and confidence in the arts); and managing the Community Panel, which is the key mechanism for providing feedback to the consortium. The second strand of activities was around new commissions and interventions with world class artists, to be led by Forma, and EDC would lead on the third strand of activities that would build new partnerships to support the sustainability and legacy of the project.



Photo: Lorraine Dawson 'Go and See 'Seven Stories'

## OUTCOMES

The changes to the artistic programming after the review allowed for outcomes to be identified for three very distinct phases of work. During the first phase of activities, the audience turnout was generally high with approximately 10,000 attendees. However, according to monitoring data collected for some of the activities, more than half of the visitors had participated in the arts in the last 12 months, rather than being new engagers in line with CPP outcomes. In addition, although the participant numbers were high, the quality of engagement was perceived to be low; the lack of community involvement and engagement in the run-up to the first festival meant that people did not feel connected to the artwork and were not inspired by it:

**“We were so focused on the output, in terms of something happening across the area after a long build up...we just didn’t have the time, the knowledge or friends in the community to do the community engagement beforehand”** EDC

**“It did disengage quite a few people because that’s [a lack of community involvement in the run-up to the festival] exactly what we didn’t want.”** Community leader

Although the quality of the events were well-regarded by the EDC team and the Arts Council, the activities did not meet some of the short-term outcomes of CPP, such as building up capacity, engaging and empowering communities and increasing understanding about the arts. The phase also provided a lot of learning for East Durham Trust about the importance of utilising their existing links to build up community engagement.

**“I’m not necessarily regretting anything that happened in the first phase because the learning was absolutely crucial, and not lost, because there was a lot of engagement that went on with that. However, what we got was performances that were almost air-lifted in, because we didn’t have the time to have that engagement with the community panel and the community at large in terms of how we would actually deliver those things and where we would deliver them and how we would engage audiences, and that sort of thing...”** East Durham Trust

Following the changes to the programme, with each partner leading on a strand in their area of expertise, there was a clear and increased focus on community engagement. As a result of East Durham Trust’s new role in delivering projects which supported communities taking the lead in shaping and owning the local arts offer, more positive outcomes were recorded which aligned with the intended outcomes of CPP in general. Activities such as the Go and Sees, Let’s Create and Creative Socials were beneficial because they increased people’s ownership of the artistic process and empowered them to make decisions and take a lead in delivering the activities and events that would occur.

In addition, bringing people together through activities like the Go and Sees and Creative Socials has helped to raise awareness of the arts offer and infrastructure in the area; groups are now better linked together and people generally have a greater knowledge of the venues and settings available. For example, one interviewee highlighted that after she helped facilitate an event showcasing some of the local community arts groups, every group involved had since seen an increase in members.

Alongside the benefits for local people, East Durham Trust was also able to build up capacity to the extent that they now have an arts strand to their provision to mutual benefit. In addition, many of the staff in East Durham Trust who have worked on EDC have been able to transfer some of their learning about arts engagement and integrate it into other aspects of the organisation's provision.

**“The staff who are involved and run projects to improve digital inclusion, to deliver food parcels, to support mental health and wellbeing... all of those individuals and beyond, with the volunteers, have a greater understanding of arts and arts development as a result of what we've done so far” East Durham Trust**

There have also been perceived outcomes for the wider community, although the evidence is anecdotal and would benefit from some further analysis to validate these outcomes. However, as the events have often made use of unusual venues – such as the East Durham coast or the Denes – more people are aware of these areas and are visiting these places more regularly, which is beneficial for boosting tourism in the area.

Overall the two very different approaches to programming by EDC have led to a range of outcomes, but the positive outcomes have been achieved by experimenting with different approaches - highlighting the importance of taking an action learning approach and putting that learning into practice.



Photo: Jess Hunt 'Go and See 'Hardwick Park Toddler Trail'





Photo: Friends of Blackhall Library  
Creative Social 'Launch of Friends of Blackhall Library'

## WHAT WORKED WELL

- EDC used an action learning approach** which was perceived by stakeholders to work well because it enabled the team to identify that the activity programming was not achieving many of the key intended outcomes of the overall CPP project. For example, one of the main issues identified was a mismatch in the language that the arts and non-arts partners were using, which led to differences in understanding. Once this was addressed – through the review period – the partners were able to work towards a common aim and mission and they could structure a project that would equally draw on the expertise of all of the partners.

**“I think that it’s really interesting in terms of working with non-arts partners... the language you use and understanding how ‘one word to me might mean another to you’ and that’s when it gets interesting... you have to dig deep down and have that understanding to be able to move forwards.”** East Durham Trust

Once this was addressed – through the review period – the partners were able to work towards a common aim and mission and they could structure a project that would equally draw on the expertise of all of the partners.

- The strand approach used in the second phase of EDC worked well** because it ensured that each of their partners had their own designated role, which played to their strengths and expertise. In particular, by leading on the audience and community engagement strand, East Durham Trust had more control over how they could engage the local community in arts activities, without compromising their values and objectives as a poverty alleviation charity. As a result they were able to rebuild any trust that had been lost with the public during the first phase of the project. In addition, by taking a more integrated approach during the second phase of the project, East Durham Trust were able to reaffirm their position as a key delivery partner whose role – as a non-arts partner – is to represent the wider community of East Durham.

**“I just think our role became much more strategic, our voice became much more heard; and when I say ‘our’ I mean the wider community to a large extent.”** East Durham Trust



Photo: Richard Kenworthy Go and See 'Pirates of Crimdon Dene'

## LESSONS LEARNT

- As highlighted, a pivotal point of EDC's project** was the review process following the first phase of delivery. Although the consortium identified that initial activities were high quality and that they were successful in delivering such an ambitious programme in a short period of time, the key lesson learned was that this ambitious programme should have been at the end of the first phase of EDC, with the lead-up to it focusing on building up community engagement. EDC identified that there was a clear need to invest time in community engagement – through utilising East Durham Trust's existing links – to build up people's confidence and interest to become involved in the arts. At first, this could appear to be compromising the quality of the art to maximise engagement levels, but may also teach us that great art means different things to different people. Additionally, over time more people can be introduced to further inspiring and excellent art.

**“Targeting things that we know people will definitely go and see, get the audience there, gain their trust, and then building on that to introduce them to other things, perhaps something that they might not have gone to see.”** Community leader

As the project progressed, the stakeholders interviewed identified that prioritising community engagement was more important as it had the potential to have greater implications for the sustainability of arts engagement at the end of the project.

- Another lesson was learned regarding the practicalities of the project.** Some of the projects, particularly in the first phase, had a poor audience turn-out because of oversights with the scheduling. For example, one stakeholder commented that a big event in the first season had a poor turn-out because it coincided with an important football match in a neighbouring city. Through closer liaison with the community leaders, this issue would have been avoided, as they would have foreseen such a clash and would have advised on timetabling. Understanding the other interests of the target audience is necessary for ensuring effective scheduling, and this can be done through community engagement and consultation.
- For EDC, part of the learning process has been about experimenting** with different approaches to engagement. Encapsulated in the activities such as 'Let's Create' is the idea that they can experiment with approaches - it does not necessarily have to work, as long as they learn from the experience and take it forward to improve provision.

**“Rather than a big 20 day festival with 40 events in, maybe we can test one thing, testing an assumption, and try a different way of working, so then at the end of it you can go: this is our biggest assumption, this is what this word meant at the start to each of us [arts and non-arts partners] and this is what it means to us now and how we can take it forward.” EDC**

- › **When non-arts partners** are a central part of the delivery – as in East Durham Trust – it is necessary for them to be assertive and honest throughout the process to ensure that everyone is clear about their role in the project. There is also a need for partners to be flexible

**“If you’re not going to listen to people and if you’re not going to change, then there’s no point getting involved because it can be so damaging.” EDC**

## ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE

Although the first phase of the project struggled to maintain engagement across the local community, stakeholders were generally ‘very proud’ of their achievements and that they had been able to deliver a demanding and artistically excellent programme of activities. This was acknowledged at both the ‘place’ level and also by the Arts Council, but simultaneously there was a view at both of these levels that there was a mismatch between the local community’s expectations and what was actually delivered.

**“Arts Council were so supportive, they’d said to us that the artistic quality of the first festival was absolutely outstanding... but they recognised the need to review our approach to create real local ownership” EDC**

Striving to quickly present an unfamiliar, yet high quality artistic programme early on was potentially damaging for East Durham Trust, because expectations had been built for a project that would engage and empower people, but it did not deliver. Through action learning EDC identified that they needed to take a holistic approach to designing activities, to re-address the balance between quality of engagement and the artistic quality. During the second phase, stakeholders believe that this balance has been re-addressed; for example by ensuring that artists embed themselves in the local community without an agenda for their art and really learn about the stories and experiences of the community so that they can capture it in their pieces.

**“Testing different approaches led and created by people with diverse backgrounds, skills, hopes and experiences has given us an insight to the areas of the programme which require more support in terms of excellence of engagement, artistic quality and quality of experience. We’ve steadily implemented what we’ve learnt each time we do something new to readdress the balance across the whole programme; working towards an holistic approach for the next part of our journey”** East Durham Trust

However, it was also identified that with the target audience there may always be a tension between achieving artistic excellence and the excellence of engagement, and that this should be accepted and accommodated.

**“If you’re going to come back to high quality art, yes I know there are levels of art that are considered to be higher quality, and if we engage people so they want to work through to experience those high quality arts, well then that’s fine, but we’ve got a whole lot of people in the middle who might never want to do that, so does that mean they don’t get a chance with anything?”** Community leader

Overall, the lessons learned from the non-arts partnership and community engagement revealed that although both artistic quality and quality of engagement can be achieved, they must be addressed holistically.

## GOOD PRACTICE: ENGAGING THE LOCAL COMMUNITY THROUGH CREATIVE SOCIALS

Of all the activities led by East Durham Trust, the Creative Socials were viewed by stakeholders as a particularly effective mechanism for enabling people from areas of least engagement to participate in the arts. The Creative Social is an initiative that offers support for non-traditional arts groups to host events featuring creative activity and food, designed to increase participation and confidence in the arts. Creative Socials tap into the community engagement aspect of CPP by empowering local people to have the opportunity to shape the programming in the area, but they also provide the opportunity to engage in different types of art; increasing their knowledge and understanding about the arts. One community member who has been involved in developing the Creative Socials has seen a number of people in the community come forward, asking about what is going on and what they can contribute to next, which is promising because it highlights the potential for the activities to be sustained in the community:

**“There is an increase in awareness about what is available in our own area.”** Community leader



Photo: Friends of Blackhall Library Creative Social 'Launch of Friends of Blackhall Library'

## TRANSFERABILITY

One of the main areas where value was added to EDC was through the mechanisms that the non-arts partner, East Durham Trust, could provide to maximise the community engagement aspect of the project. East Durham Trust's model of working is one that was developed in response to the needs of the local community, working across a large geographic area, across a range of villages and needing to engage with multiple community ambassadors to be able to access hard-to-reach people. The local context is therefore central to the community engagement strand for EDC, but there are aspects of the model that could be transferred to other arts projects. In particular, working with a non-arts partner with strong links in the community and working with them in a flexible way could help other projects to build up their community engagement:

**“If I was going with a blank sheet of paper to another area now, I would be looking for these kinds of established communication mechanisms”** East Durham Trust



## SUSTAINABILITY

Stakeholders generally felt optimistic about the sustainability of the project, particularly after the move to a much more integrated approach which was more openly discussed across the partners. The strand approach provided partners with clearer and more defined roles, and the action learning approach allowed them to be more assertive about what they felt was working well or less well. In addition, East Durham Trust has built up capacity as an organisation with CPP enabling it to build an arts strand into its provision. There is now scope for them to explore this as a potential route for sustaining the community aspects of their provision.

In general, stakeholders could not foresee any big risks or challenges to the sustainability of the project. For East Durham Trust, their next steps with progressing the work they have achieved through EDC so far would be linked to their existing provision that is delivered outside of EDC, but it is currently too early to say exactly how this will manifest.

**“We would be adding elements [to our other aspects of work] which have been influenced by Creative People and Places... We have an arts arm [to our organisation] and we have to think how we nurture that for the future of our organisation.”** East Durham Trust

Having a support structure like East Durham Trust in place could be vital to enable community leaders to keep working with their community to develop arts projects and activities. Without a wider support structure, it is unlikely that community leaders could continue to do the work they have done due to a lack of capacity and resources. However, through the interviews, it is clear there is an ambition to continue engaging communities in the arts, through many of the methods developed through CPP.

**“There are lots of different roads I can see use going down but we just need the support structure really”** Community leader

As EDC has been successful in securing funding from Arts Council England to continue the project until 2020, the make up of the new phase will focus on communities taking the lead in shaping their own arts offer, supported by a change in the make-up of the consortium. It is anticipated that East Durham Trust will continue by leading on this focus of work, reflecting the strength of the partnership working that has developed over the past three years.

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