

NO MORE NOWT

ENGAGING MEN IN THE ARTS

Case Study — Open Source learning resource — 2024
Developing culture by, with and for people in 'Left Behind' communities across County Durham
Compiled by Wavehill on behalf of No More Nowt

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Images courtesy of The Six Twenty - Fandom project. Scratch & community event featuring some of the resident participants at Blackhall Community Centre, October 2023.

INTRODUCTION

The business plan for [No More Nowt](#) (formerly East Durham Creates) for the period 2021-2025, titled 'No one left behind by culture', aims to improve the lives of County Durham residents by promoting greater access to and participation in arts and culture. One of the SMART targets within the business plan relates to improving access and engagement, specifically by actively tackling barriers to access and stimulating an increase in the numbers of people from areas of low engagement who create, experience, commission and engage with arts and culture in the county. Whilst this target refers to increasing engagement across all ages and socioeconomic categories, there is a specific commitment to increase male engagement with the programme at all levels from 16% in 2021 to 25% by 2025.

The [Untold Stories Commission](#), launched in 2021, focused on providing funding for creative practitioners, artists, or organisations to co-create an artistic response on the theme of gathering and presenting untold stories. The brief outlined that these could be produced in a variety of formats such as a theatre performance, a visual piece of art, storytelling sessions, digital response, or sound recordings etc. The key is for the final work to be co-created with local people and presented in an accessible way.

Applications were reviewed by the Community Panel, who expressed a particular interest in applications from County Durham based artists or organisations. The expectation was that the appointed artist or organisation would deliver a minimum of 24 days' worth of engagement sessions with local communities. Three organisations were selected based on their response to the commission, namely

CreativePop CIC, The Auxiliary and Lubetkin Theatre.

As part of the Untold Stories commission, in January 2022 the Community Panel launched a call-out specifically seeking to engage a creative practitioner, artist or organisation to co-create an artistic response on the theme of gathering and presenting untold stories, specifically working with men as an underrepresented audience and participant group. Six Twenty Theatre were successful in their application.

This case study draws on the experiences of the Untold Stories commission to shine a light on approaches to and challenges encountered in engaging men in arts and cultural activities in East Durham.



Image courtesy of The Six Twenty - Fandom project. A resident participant. Photo taken at Blackhall Community Centre, October 2023.

CONTEXT

The Role of Arts in Improving Men's Wellbeing

County Durham is home to a rich cultural history and a population diverse in its experiences and challenges. In recent years, one issue of increasing concern in the region, as in many other areas, is men's mental health. Men in County Durham, particularly those from economically deprived areas and [Left Behind Neighbourhoods](#), face a unique set of challenges when it comes to addressing their mental wellbeing. In particular, men in County Durham, as in many areas, deal with societal and cultural expectations of masculinity, often equating strength with emotional restraint or self-reliance. These ideals can create barriers for men seeking support for mental health challenges, which often include social isolation, poor general health and wellbeing, self-harm, and suicide.¹

Within County Durham, there is a clear acknowledgement of the stigma surrounding men's mental health, and a commitment to address this issue and improve the mental wellbeing of men. The 2020 Review of Suicide Rates and Mental Health and Wellbeing Report by Durham County Council underscored the challenges County Durham faces in the realm of male mental health, particularly evident in male suicide rates that surpassed both national and North East averages. Importantly, the Review stressed the urgency of addressing the embedded stigma surrounding mental health, calling for concerted efforts to promote mental health, safeguard wellbeing, and actively challenge the stigma surrounding male mental health.²

¹ [Durham County Council \(2021\)](#)

² [Durham County Council \(2020\) Review of Suicide Rates and Mental Health and Wellbeing in County Durham.](#)

Further, County Durham actively participated in the national "Prevention at Scale" pilot programme, joining 12 other regions in this initiative. County Durham's unique focus within this programme was centered on mental health, suicide prevention, and challenging stigma and discrimination. This focused approach underscores County Durham's recognition of the need for a proactive, preventative strategy to counteract the stigma surrounding men's mental health.³

This approach aligns with overarching themes articulated in a [Vision for County Durham 2019-2035](#), where the County Durham Partnership provides a vision for what the county will look like in 2035. Under the theme of 'Connected Communities', the vision outlines an aspiration where social networks are an important part of people's lives, in reducing social isolation, providing a sense of belonging and providing a role in building communities. The 'Mental Health at Scale' also evidences this which aims to tackle the stigma and discrimination of mental health focusing on through building more resilient communities and promote positive mental health.

Since 2005/06 men have consistently been less likely than women to report having engaged in the arts.⁴ Men are also considerably less likely to engage in social prescribing activities than women, and as a result may have less opportunity to be introduced to arts and creative activities that may be beneficial for their health, in particular mental health. The 2022/2023 Report for the Participation Survey shows that female adults were more likely to engage physically with the arts (91%) than male adults (87%).⁵ These disparities in arts engagement therefore underscore the

³ Ibid.

⁴ Taking Part Survey 2019/20 & Community Life Survey (Focus on gender) 2017/18

⁵ [Main Report for the Participation Survey \(April 2022 to March 2023\)](#)

importance of targeted efforts to bridge the gap, ensuring that men have equitable access to arts-based activities.

East Durham Trust's CREE project, which draws inspiration from an Australian concept known as 'Men's Sheds', was initiated in response to the closure of traditional industries and the subsequent loss of social gathering spaces, significantly reducing contact among men, and in some instances, contributing to the development of mental health issues. The CREE Network offers men a platform to engage in diverse activities, ranging from gardening to DIY workshops, providing a communal space where individuals can come together for constructive conversations around mental health, masculinity, and overall health and wellbeing.⁶

This also aligns with the widespread acceptance that to effectively address male mental health, interventions need to be customised and innovative in their approach, characterised by a 'blokey' sensibility and a reach that extends to create communal spaces and social networks where individuals can come together for constructive conversations around mental health, masculinity, and overall health and wellbeing.⁷



Image courtesy of The Six Twenty - Fandom project. A resident participant displays his homemade beekeeping products. Photo taken at Blackhall Community Centre, October 2023.

⁶ [Durham County Council \(2021\)](#)

⁷ [Independent Age \(2007\) Isolation: the emerging crisis of older men](#)

PROJECTS AND PARTNERS

The evaluation team engaged the commissioned organisations to explore views and perspectives on the role of arts in supporting change and facilitating arts participation and engagement amongst men in County Durham. They included three of the four organisations commissioned as part of the wider Untold Stories commission, namely:

- The Six Twenty - Fandom project
- CreativePop CIC - Up My Street project
- The Auxiliary - From Campfire to Hearth
- Blackhall Community Centre



Image courtesy of The Six Twenty - Fandom project. Project partners, left to right; Melanie Rashbrooke (The Six Twenty), Alison Paterson (Blackhall Community Centre), James Barton (The Six Twenty). Photo taken at Blackhall Community Centre, October 2023.

OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

No More Nowt engaged various creative practitioners, artists, and organisations to co-create an artistic response on the theme of gathering and presentation untold stories, specifically working with men as an underrepresented audience and participant group.

Projects ran by The Six Twenty and CreativePop CIC illustrate this well. The Six Twenty's project, Fandom, focuses on exploring untold stories about what it means to be a fan of something or someone, such as football, music, or film, and how being a fan can shape a person's identity and provide solace during both good and bad times. CreativePop CIC's project, Up My Street, involves creating a narrative around the streets in several areas of East Durham, emphasising the importance of the community's history and the people who have shaped it. The Auxiliary's project, From Campfire to Hearth, aimed to engage the East Durham community and collect untold stories through a series of campfire events, workshops, food gatherings, and exhibitions.

Both the Six Twenty and Creative POP's projects distinguish themselves by putting a specific focus on engaging men in the arts, an approach not commonly adopted by other Untold Stories commissions. The projects aspire to reach men through various avenues, selecting settings that resonate with their passions, including streets where they grew up or hobbies such as pigeon crees, bowling, and beekeeping, to share untold stories. The project also avoids overt references to traditional theatre, preferring an informal, story-centric approach to cater to the preferences of the target demographic. The project is therefore well-aligned to the vision of No More Nowt in driving excellence in art while fostering deeper community

engagement. Importantly, male engagement has risen from 12% in 2022-2023 to 20% in 2023-2024. This positions No More Nowt on a positive trajectory to achieve its goal of increasing male engagement across all programme levels, aiming for 25% by 2025, compared to the 16% in 2021.

Both projects found that engaging men in the arts necessitates an approach aligned with traditional masculine interests and cultural norms. This approach emphasizes activities that resonate with men's preferences, prioritizing the process of sharing stories over polished outcomes.

By focusing on relatable subjects and providing an informal space for discussions, projects have catered to the need and comfort of men in these communities, making arts engagement more accessible and appealing. For the Six Twenty's fandom project, in particular, a core concept behind the project was the idea that the community's stories should be celebrated, not just focusing on the challenges faced by left-behind neighbourhoods. The team believed that men wanted to talk about real, meaningful things, and this is what led to them opening-up about their mental health.

Engaging men in the arts has demonstrated a range of positive impacts on their overall wellbeing. According to feedback from male participants, their involvement in arts-based activities has led to improved mental health, stronger social connections, and a heightened sense of community belonging. The opportunity to share personal narratives and express themselves creatively has facilitated both self-awareness and self-reflection.

In terms of output and artistic content produced, The Six Twenty delivered a performance based on untold stories, primarily focusing on men's interests and passions, including beekeeping, pigeon racing, bowls, wrestling, the game Dungeons

and Dragons, and football. The Auxiliar's commission worked with four different artists, including a visual artist, a musician/songwriter, a ceramicist, and a sound artist. Further, the culmination of the project was an exhibition in the Arts Café and a campfire event, with the musician also performing her work at Sonic Arts Week and at the launch of Middlesborough Arts Week. The CreativePop CIC's work was primarily visual arts based around print and culminated in an outdoor exhibition of bunting.

Further, team members from the Six Twenty noted that the arts activities have served as a platform for open conversations on topics such as masculinity, mental health, and general wellbeing, effectively helping to reduce associated stigmas. This has encouraged men to engage in discussions about their experiences and challenges, fostering a sense of mutual understanding and support within the community.

The projects also enabled participants to recognise the significance of their own stories and skills. Men participating in the Six Twenty's fandom project shared that they felt their personal experiences and struggles were important and worthy of sharing within the project. This sense of pride and enjoyment was a direct result of feeling acknowledged and valued, providing them with the comfort and confidence to engage with artists and open up about their personal challenges.

The projects exist within the broader context of efforts to address the challenges faced by left-behind neighbourhoods in East Durham. The APPG for 'Left Behind Neighbourhoods' report which makes a case for remaking the levelling up agenda to put 'left behind' areas front and centre of a new mission of national renewal.⁸ The report calls for changes

⁸ APPG Left Behind Neighbourhoods (2023)- 'A neighbourhood strategy for national renewal'. Final report of the APPG for 'left behind'

including the redistribution of power from the centre to community; transforming funding and resources so that left behind communities do not miss out and shifting the culture from control to trust. These are sentiments very much shared with key anchor and infrastructure organisations within the left behind neighbourhoods where No More Nowt is operating.

One of the biggest challenges associated with working in new communities, in particular left-behind neighbourhoods, is establishing trust. These communities often feel that they've been underserved and may be sceptical about organisations intentions and commitment to fostering change. The complexity is further amplified when engaging men in the arts, introducing a gender-specific element.

Discussions with the team at the Six Twenty revealed that initial hesitation existed when the men interacted with a woman and expressed a preference for opening up to a man and discomfort with the presence of women during sessions. Staff at CreativePop CIC shared similar sentiments where they noted that female artists face cultural challenges, such as traditional views that restrict women's access to certain spaces, like bars or social clubs.

They also emphasised that relatability is a key factor, as men are more inclined to share stories and may be less concerned about the final output, while they noted women tend to prioritise the outcome. This is also evidenced in the Handbook for Cultural Engagement with Older Men which found that sharing a similar social background was considered to be important in terms of membership of a group.⁹

neighbourhoods' inquiry into levelling up. October 2023

⁹ [A Handbook for Cultural Engagement with Older Men \(2023\)](#)

This underscores the fact that building trust, especially when involving men in the arts, requires a longer period. These insights also reiterate the need for sensitivity and tailored approaches in engaging men in these communities, particularly when addressing issues of trust and gender dynamics, as well as fully explaining to participants why they're involved and what it will lead to.

Moreover, this meant that listening to the community became an essential part of both projects. For Fandom, and to contextualise, this process of building trust was made possible by No More Nowt extending the commission from its original £5,000 to a total of £13,000.

The team at the Six Twenty emphasised that, like any community project, it was crucial to engage with community members on their own terms. Similarly, while The Auxiliary's From Campfire to Hearth project was successful in engaging younger audiences, staff noted that better communication and relationship development could have expanded the project's reach to engage men. By comparison, The Auxiliary's From Campfire to Hearth project was relatively light touch due to already having established local relationships. However, project staff noted that it was easier to attract families and younger audiences due to the idea of a campfire over any other demographic group, and due to stretched capacity it was difficult to take the time to build relationships with harder to reach groups like men.

This also evidences the No More Nowt Business Plan, which emphasises long-term engagement and collaborative work to address the specific needs of County Durham and promote culture as a transformative force. This approach includes trust-building, locality focus, and partnering with organisations already connected to these communities.¹⁰

Understanding the local context has also been an important factor for both projects in establishing trust among the residents within communities. CreativePop CIC benefited greatly by being led by individuals with established connections within local communities.

Their familiarity, shared experiences, and personal ties were instrumental in building trust among residents, with their local insights providing access to gatekeeper organisations and individuals who could help facilitate engagement with men. Importantly, the Six Twenty's understanding of the local culture, particularly in working men's clubs, was essential for crafting strategies that resonated with the men in the area.

Their knowledge of the local culture and the ability to navigate cultural nuances, such as discomfort with women being at sessions, showcased their adaptability. The inclusion of male artists into the team was a pragmatic response to situations where certain male groups did not allow females to attend. Further, the use of local infrastructure, such as community centres and traditional activities, served as effective entry points for engaging men. This was also evident in the Auxiliary's project, where the use of community venues, including Blackhall Community Hall, was effective in connecting with local residents.

The territorial nature of East Durham's communities impacts engagement approaches. These communities, including Horden, Trimdon, Seaham, Murton, Easington, and Blackhall, possess distinct identities rooted in their streets and family histories. Discussions with CreativePop outlined that certain areas and streets are central to these communities, and local residents have deep attachments to them. As such, residents' strong ties to their neighbourhoods influence their social interactions and preferred locations for engagement. Engagement strategies must

¹⁰ No More Nowt Business Plan 2021-2025

therefore align with these local identities, offering activities in neutral venues. However, this strategy introduces challenges which should warrant consideration. Opting for spaces deemed neutral may involve selecting locations where residents do not have pre-existing connections. This, in turn, could entail residents travelling beyond their immediate communities, potentially facing transport limitations in areas where links may not be as robust.

Finally, and moving forward, artists involved in projects have identified recommendations to continue to enhance the work being done to engage men in the arts. They underscored the importance of having more resources at their disposal. This includes the need for additional people and increased funding to bring on more people into projects. They found that bringing 2 or 3 people to each group was an effective approach, but it also requires a well-staffed team to ensure that all participants receive the attention and support they need.



Image courtesy of The Six Twenty - Resident participants.
Photo taken at Blackhall Community Centre, October 2023.

LESSONS LEARNED

ONE

There is evidence to show the effectiveness of adopting a tailored approach to engage men in the arts, aligning with traditional masculine interests and cultural norms. This approach prioritised activities that resonated with men's preferences, making arts engagement more accessible and appealing to them.

TWO

The Untold Stories commission demonstrated that using an informal, story-centric approach over traditional theatre settings, catering to the preferences of their target demographic.

THREE

Trust is a critical factor in working in left-behind communities. Engaging men in the arts, especially when introducing a gender-specific element, required a longer period of time to establish trust. It was necessary to be sensitive to the community's needs and dynamics, explaining the purpose of their involvement.

FOUR

Understanding local context was crucial for building trust and engaging residents in communities. The projects adapted their engagement methods, including one-to-one interactions, home visits, and using local infrastructure. Familiarity with local culture and community connections were instrumental in building trust.

FIVE

Collaborating with local communities is essential in the development of any intervention or investment plan. The arts offer a valuable means to actively involve community members, fostering trust and relationships that allow for the understanding of local needs and aspirations. This collaboration ensures that plans are responsive to the specific requirements and desires of the community.

SUMMARY

Men's mental health and wellbeing in County Durham, especially in economically deprived and "Left Behind Neighbourhoods", presents unique challenges.

Societal and cultural norms around masculinity have led to barriers for men seeking support for mental health challenges which can manifest as social isolation and poor mental health.

County Durham has recognised the urgency of addressing the stigma around men's mental health, which has led to active participation in national pilot programmes centred on mental health and stigma reduction, highlighting the role of the arts in improving men's mental health.

The No More Nowt Business Plan fits well into this wider policy context, striving to enrich the lives of County Durham's residents by promoting increased access to and participation in arts and culture.

Projects funded by No More Nowt have been tailored to be more 'blokey', resonating with men's cultural preferences, social norms, and interests.

This approach prioritises relatable subjects, informal discussions, and spaces conducive to sharing untold stories.

This has yielded positive impacts, including improved mental health and a stronger connection to the community. The lessons learned emphasise the importance of local context in building trust and tailoring engagement approaches. Understanding the cultural nuances of the community and aligning strategies with their preferences have been key to successful arts engagement.

Further, the territorial nature of East Durham's communities underscores the need to offer activities in neutral venues that resonate with each locality's distinct identity. Overall, the success of these endeavours have been rooted in their customised and innovative approach, sensitivity to local context, and recognition of the importance of building trust when engaging men in these communities.



Image courtesy of The Six Twenty - Fandom project. Photo taken at Blackhall Community Centre, October 2023.

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Social and economic research

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