IDEAS TEST

CREATIVE
AND PEOPLE
PLACES

ENGAGING COMMUNITIES IN THE ARTS

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CASE STUDY THEME

❯ Engaging Communities in the Arts

PROJECT SUMMARY

Ideas Test is a programme of arts and cultural activity in Swale & Medway. Located on the Thames Estuary in North Kent, Swale & Medway is an area characterised by a lack of arts infrastructure and professional networks, and a low level of arts engagement.[1]

The aims of the project are to increase opportunities for people in the local area to take part in arts and creative activity. It also seeks to use arts and creativity to empower people to experiment with new and radically different approaches and to develop an inspiring, sustainable arts programme that will continue to engage and motivate people in local communities towards the arts over the long-term.[2]

Ideas Test is one of 21 Creative People and Places (CPP) programmes funded by Arts Council England, and it is delivered by a consortium comprised of representatives from local arts, community and voluntary sector organisations, which is chaired by Swale Community and Voluntary Service (SCVS), and includes Creek Creative, Sheppey Matters, Medway Voluntary Action, Gulbenkian Theatre, and Whitstable Biennale.

This case study draws on interviews with Ideas Test staff and Community Catalysts. Community Catalysts are a mix of professional and amateur artists, volunteers from local groups and organisations, as well as other local people otherwise disassociated with the arts who work to stimulate and promote community engagement. It looks at how Ideas Test has worked with Community Catalysts, the key outcomes of the project, including what worked well and less well and the main lessons that have been learned.

[1.] COaST (2016) *Ideas Test – Interim Report*
[2.] ibid

HIVE. Photo: Simon Shaw

KEY FINDINGS

> Ideas Test has community engagement at the heart of its programme and has built a network of over 100 Community Catalysts that have been involved in all aspects of the programme from design to decision making. With support from Ideas Test, the Community Catalysts have also devised and led on numerous small projects, which have been both artistically experimental and engaging for the local community.

> Ideas Test's approach to the programme is open and inclusive to anyone who is interested regardless whether they are an arts practitioner or not. This has allowed the programme to develop organically from the grassroots and be responsive to the needs of the community, which means that more local people are slowly starting to see arts in a different light and are more likely to want to engage with arts and culture.[3]

> Local amateur and professional artists have benefitted from the professional and learning opportunities in different ways, both from their engagement as a Community Catalyst and from Ideas Test's funding for small projects, which have enabled them to develop and deliver engaging arts projects. Over time this has helped to increase the local arts offer as many Community Catalysts have gone to create more work for the local community.

[3.] ibid

INTRODUCTION

In contrast to the affluent and picturesque towns and villages of West Kent, many parts of Swale & Medway are characterised by pockets of high deprivation, with many Lower Layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs) in places such as Sheerness, Murston, Leysdown and Warden, and Sheppey being in the most deprived 10 per cent of neighbourhoods in England.[4] Although Swale & Medway is predominantly rural, with a number of dispersed villages and small towns, there are three main towns in Swale (Sittingbourne, Faversham and Sheerness) and five main towns in Medway (Chatham, Gillingham, Rainham, Rochester and Strood). Many of the villages and towns in the area were built around the maritime, industrial and agricultural activities, but the decline of heavy industry had a devastating impact on the area, resulting in high levels of unemployment, health inequalities, poor educational attainment, and a lack of investment in local facilities, including the local art infrastructure.

Prior to CPP, local attitudes towards arts were very mixed. Reasons for not engaging in the arts include low levels of interest in the arts and a perception that the arts are not relevant to local people.[5]

According to Ideas Test there was a quite lot of suspicion about the arts and people who are not from the local area. The challenge for Ideas Test in developing a local arts programme was therefore to engage a wide range of people who may have thought the arts was not for them and have had limited opportunities to experience arts and cultural activities. So Ideas Test made a conscious decision to employ a local person to work on their audience development (and the wider programme), which has enabled them to identify people who were interested in becoming Community Catalysts and to reach out to local people more effectively.

"There is a reasonable level of hostility to arts, but some of those people will be involved in other kinds of cultural or creative activities, which they see as entirely different. A lot of people are quite territorial so they are resistant to things being brought in from somewhere else" Ideas Test

Podcast workshop with Gordon Lamont. Photo: Courtesy of Ideas Test

[4] Kent County Council. 2015. *The English Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD 2015): Headline findings for Kent.* www.kent.gov.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/7953/Indices-of-Deprivation-headline-findings.pdf

[5] Ideas Test. 2012. *Creative People and Places: Swale & Medway Business Plan.*

APPROACH TO COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

When Ideas Test was conceptualised, its core mission was about growing creative engagement opportunities from the grassroots for people in Swale & Medway. Ideas Test's current programme is comprised four strands:

›	**Ideas Test artistic programme** – comprised of Small Commissions which enabled arts practitioners and Community Catalysts to apply for funding of up to £5,000 to develop and test their artistic projects with the local community. Some successful small experiments were then supported to become larger projects. Other large scale projects included Out of the Ordinary commissions which are largescale commissions created with local communities and Now Showing, which aims to make high quality arts more accessible in dispersed and rural areas of Swale & Medway through the creative use of venues such as village halls and community spaces.

›	**Ideas Test skills and learning** – the Creative Network programme builds skills and capacity in the local community through workshops, masterclasses, informal learning, mentoring, business development support and work with the formal education sector.

›	**Ideas Test @ No.34** – this former shop in Sittingbourne is the home of Ideas Test and a creative hub for start-ups and digital businesses; young entrepreneurs and creatives who want to explore and develop a creative business idea. This can be through co-working or signing up to the No.34 Membership Scheme to use Ideas Test's facilities, get access to the network and community activities. It offers a small performance and exhibition space in the centre of Sittingbourne where there is no other equivalent provision.

›	**Ideas Test research** – Ideas Test is working with its research partners to gather data on Ideas Test activities to identify ways to improve arts engagement, create social value, and deliver wider social outcomes.

The Community Catalysts were introduced as the backbone to the Ideas Test programme. Nominated by local people, Community Catalysts devised and led their own projects, financially supported by Ideas Test through its Small Commissions. The Community Catalysts are also actively involved in the various decision making panels for the programme's commissions. Not only have they been the advocates of the programme, they have also been instrumental in shaping and deciding the kind of arts and creative experiences that local people want in Swale & Medway. Some of Community Catalysts have also become part of Idea Test staff team.

"One of the first things we did when we launched Ideas Test was to talk to local residents, via social media and at a series of events and public meetings, to find out who in their community were active go-getters who wanted to make a difference, people who would become our Community Catalysts." Ideas Test

This approach has ensured that the programme was set up in way that it is embedded in the local community and reflective of the diverse range of interests and expertise of local people. By drawing on people's local knowledge, this has allowed the programme to experiment with a wealth of ideas and activities and for the programme to grow organically. Over time this has been consolidated into a more coherent and focused programme.

"At the beginning it was very much about enabling and facilitating things to happen, it was about variety. We wanted to capture the variety that was out there so we could get it to a point were we knew what it was and people could see it too. Whereas now we are making more choices based on our research questions, about where we can learn the most and where we can get the most change." Ideas Test

OUTCOMES

Ideas Test has successfully mobilised over 100 local people as Community Catalysts for the programme since they began in 2013. Community Catalysts have benefitted greatly from being part of a network of creative people which is leading to increased interaction, knowledge sharing, and collaboration.

Ideas Test's bold and experimental approach to programming has demonstrated that it is possible to combine grassroots engagement without compromising on the quality of the art. Ideas Test put a lot of effort into building strong networks in the local community and with nationally renowned artistic partners interested in community engagement. We explore this outcome further in the Achieving Excellence section below.

"Our experience is that you can engage most people with most things if you go about in it in the right way." Ideas Test

Based on the interviews with Ideas Test and Community Catalysts, the programme appears to have strengthened both the professional and amateur arts communities by helping to create networks, providing development and learning opportunities, and supporting the conditions in which innovation and collaboration can thrive. According to the Community Catalysts, developing and delivering an arts project through Ideas Test, has given them greater confidence and experience of leading projects in their communities.

"Building that web of connections in the local area has been important. People are now working together, making new networks, working on projects together. They are much more networked now." Ideas Test

STEAM, Urban Playground Team. Photo: Dee O'Bray

One example of this is Art in the Park, where Lynda Marshall (a Community Catalyst and member of Friends of Milton Creek) and Ideas Test supported Milton Creek Trust to host an arts event in the park. In 2014 and 2015, Ideas Test funded several professional artists to run a series of artistic workshops as part of the event to help attract local families to the park. The event was a success and is now in its third year and attracts over 2,000 people. The Trust has since gone on to secure in-kind support from the local council and continues to work with a number of professional arts organisations, local voluntary or amateur groups each year. According to Lynda, without the initial support from Ideas Test, Art in the Park would not have been able to support the artists' workshops or attract such a large local audience.

For the community, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that low engagers are slowly starting to see the arts in a different light and are more likely to want to engage with arts and culture in the future. According to Ideas Test, 85% of people surveyed[6] said that they would like to attend more arts events and activities. Many were motivated to learn something new and get involved in participatory events and activities.

On an individual level, Community Catalyst Gordon Lamont (a former BBC producer and experienced workshop facilitator) runs the podcast workshops and Confidence to Create (C2C) sessions for artists and creatives for people who are starting out or who are interested in continuing their professional development. He has also shared his expertise and knowledge with other Community Catalysts and has supported another Community Catalyst to be able to deliver the podcast workshops on their own.

"Confidence to Create has become something immensely valuable for people who are involved, as its open and free anyone can be involved. It's about doing and creating, but it's also about managing the doing and creating, so it many it's applicable beyond the arts. The way the ideas can be thrown around, and having that sense of connect with the community, it has for me exceeded all my expectations." Community Catalyst

6. Based on 204 postcard survey returns from various events - COaST (2016) *Ideas Test – Interim Report.*

WHAT WORKED WELL?

> **Community Catalysts** – Throughout the programme, Community Catalysts were encouraged to apply for small amounts of funding from the programme as part of its Small Commissions strand to enable them to experiment with different approaches to delivering new and exciting artistic experiences in ways which are embedded in and engaged with local communities.

"It was about growing arts engagement from local people's existing interests and activities, and having them involved every step of the way in terms of how decisions were made. It's been very much about demand-led programming. That was very much the approach and the Community Catalysts were absolutely integral to that." Ideas Test

> **Diversity and inclusion** – Ideas Test has changed local perceptions of art and is helping to redefine it into something which is accessible, interesting and relevant to people in Swale & Medway. Ideas Test has welcomed everyone to engage with the programme regardless of their background or interest by having an open door policy.

"If we have demonstrated anything through our Community Catalyst work is that people have a rich cultural life. It doesn't necessarily look like what we or the Arts Council recognise as arts, but actually it's a great starting point for all sorts of other stuff." Ideas Test

> **Scale of Community Catalysts network** – Initially Ideas Test had envisaged that the programme would have around 25 Community Catalysts, but it has grown to be a much larger network of people, with over 100 Community Catalysts and over 50 who are currently actively engaged. Although it has been a challenge managing lots of different people who have very different and varied interests, this has meant Ideas Test could offer greater flexibility to Community Catalysts to be engaged the programme in a way which suits them. Engagement has ranged from being actively involved in decision making, design and delivery of the whole programme, to being involved on an individual project basis.

Operation Black Antler. Photo: Courtesy of Ideas Test

LESSONS LEARNT

› **Trust** – Ideas Test has put a lot faith and trust in local people to take control of their own community arts engagement in order for it to grow organically from the grassroots, which has allowed Ideas Test not only to be responsive to the needs of the community, but for local people to feel that they have a shared ownership of it.

"If there is a lesson, it's the value of letting go of things. You don't have to tell people what to think, you don't have to educate people about what's good, you can just let go of it and let stuff happen. Excellent stuff happens and people are comfortable with it as they have generated it." Ideas Test

ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE

Ideas Test believes that its Community Catalysts are indispensable to the programme and that they have enabled them to shape the programme towards excellence in community engagement. Most importantly, the Community Catalysts have been the 'trusted eyes and ears' of the programme and through their community networks have helped to bring in audiences from quite dispersed and rural areas.

"We couldn't have run a programme like this without [the Community Catalysts], it just wouldn't have happened. The plan was that it would be bottom up and that was the mechanism that we wanted to use, the programme is embedded in the local community in a way that it would have been or couldn't have been otherwise. If we went unilaterally to make inroads in dozens and dozens of small communities, the amount of resources that would require would have been about 20 times more than what we had available." Ideas Test

Artistically, some of the Community Catalysts who are artists have demonstrated that they are excellent and high quality arts practitioners. For example the HIVE project by Community Catalyst Kate Linforth used beeswax donated by local beekeepers to offer free creative workshops where participants created beautiful beeswax tiles based on the ancient practice of encaustic art. HIVE won the Kent Creative Prize for a 3D Object 2016. Ideas Test has also worked with artist Mikhail Karikis as part of the Ain't Got No Fear project with young people on the Isle of Grain. The project involved a number of Community Catalysts who are not artists in its development and delivery. His work has been since been showcased on the Isle of Grain and at Whitstable Biennale 2016; his work has also been shortlisted for the Jerwood Award.

"We try and provide high quality experiences all the time." Ideas Test

Community Catalysts. Photo: Courtesy of Ideas Test

GOOD PRACTICE   SWALE FILM SOCIETY

Swale Film Society was set up by pair of local film enthusiasts who ran local film screenings at Pulse Café in Sittingbourne. Although it was a success, without funding they were unable to continue. One of the co-founders of the Swale Film Society subsequently was nominated as a Community Catalyst. Through Ideas Test, the Community Catalyst was able to revive the free film screenings at 34 High Street, which is the business start-up and creative venue home to Ideas Test. The films on show normally tie in with Ideas Test's themed activities, for example during the Sittingbourne Carnival, the Community Catalyst screened Charlie Chaplin's The Circus.

At the beginning there were around 8 members and the Society has now grown to over 25 members, and is now looking to move to an 88 seater venue. So there is opportunity to grow its membership and to generate some revenue. Its members were consulted on how much they were willing to pay. So they will introduce an annual membership for £5 and tickets for £2 for members or £4 for non-members. The Community Catalyst is also in the process of setting up the Swale Film Society Youth in partnership with a local youth centre that is interested in setting up film screenings at its youth clubs.

"When Ideas Test set up I was so excited that there was something for the community which wasn't another pub, charity shop or takeaway… Film is so easily accessible; anyone can watch it and have something to say. The great thing is that it has brought a lot of people together. We have such a diverse audience, from 18 to 81, it isn't just people that are passionate about film, it's people that want to get involved in the community and do something different." Community Catalyst

SUSTAINABILITY

Ideas Test is creating a lasting legacy by building local capacity in Swale & Medway through its Community Catalyst network. For example, Ideas Test initiated some arts projects for older people in care homes, which have since been taken forward by Kent Creative Arts and is run by some of Ideas Test's Community Catalysts. Overall, the sustainability in the arts sector is beginning to strengthen and some local arts practitioners are more confident and willing to apply for Grants for the Arts or other funding sources. Ideas Test host funding workshops where practitioners could meet with a grant officer to discuss their ideas.

"There was a dearth of funding applications from this area. It wasn't even a case of being turned down; no one was applying as there was a sense that it was not something that was available to them. There's been a definite change over time and some of the Community Catalysts have been able to secure grants." Ideas Test

Over the last three years, Ideas Test has increasingly evolved into an infrastructure organisation that is capable of supporting the arts sector and has helped to plug the infrastructure gap locally. Likewise, touring has been an important means of providing arts provision to the area and Ideas Test has been able to attract renowned artists to Swale & Medway. For example, Ideas Test was approached by the original 2PK performance-parkour company, Urban Playground Team to tour their performance of STEAM, an urban and contemporary dance with French free-running, as well as to work alongside local young people in Sheppey on their performance.

"The fact that we are here enables people to come in with strategic touring, as they need someone that does the audience engagement on the ground, otherwise you can't get the audience and we are starting to do that work with some people. If we weren't here there is no one else that would do it or could do it." Ideas Test

Ideas Test's current plans for phase two of CPP are to build on the learning and networks developed in the first three years. It is looking for a community partner in Medway to support the development of a community hub equivalent to the one which they have established in Swale. Ideas Test is also keen to continue working with people that they have partnered previously to grow sustainable relationships, and seeks to build on the success of Out of the Ordinary projects like Operation Black Antler with Blast Theory and Hydrocracker Theatre Company. Community Catalysts remain central to the programme.
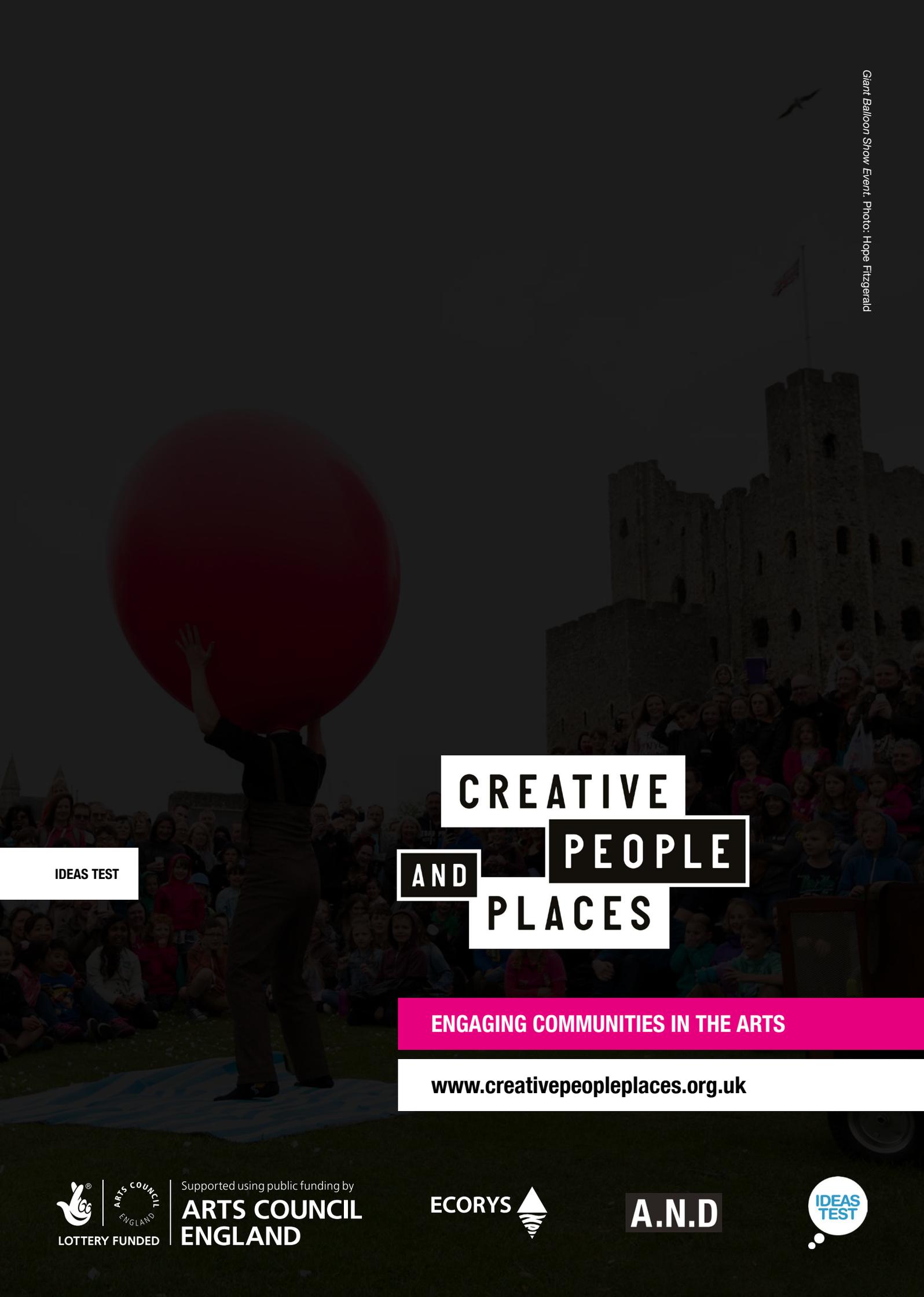
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