



BAIT

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PLACES

ARTS FOR WELLBEING: UNLOCKING SOCIAL ENERGY TO INCREASE WELLBEING



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CASE STUDY THEME

- › Arts for wellbeing; unlocking social energy to increase wellbeing

PROJECT SUMMARY

bait is a programme of arts and cultural activity across South East (SE) Northumberland and is one of 21 Creative People and Places (CPP) programmes funded by Arts Council England. The bait programme is managed by a consortium led by Woodhorn Charitable Trust and comprising Northumberland County Council (through Active Northumberland and Northumberland Public Health), Northumberland Council for Voluntary Action (NCVA), and Queens Hall Arts.¹

The project launched in 2013, initially to deliver a three year programme of events, with the aim of creating a “long-term change in the level of arts participation of people living in the area, driven by the creativity and ambition of the people living in SE Northumberland, and having a demonstrable effect on the well-being of local people and levels of social energy and activism within communities.”²

Social energy is generated when residents come together to make a positive change in their community and it's one of the three key ways in which the theme of wellbeing runs through the entire bait project, alongside family wellbeing (supporting adults and young people with caring responsibilities) and recovery wellbeing (for adults – or those who care for them - affected by substance misuse).³

This case study explores the theme of ‘arts for wellbeing’, focusing particularly on the sub-theme of ‘social energy’. Through interviews with the bait team, Creative Connectors, project curators/leaders and beneficiaries, it examines how bait has worked with partners in health and across community groups to use the arts as a mechanism for making positive change across SE Northumberland, focusing particularly on the outcomes for two geographical communities: Hirst (in Ashington) and Bedlington. As bait was successful in securing CPP funding for another three years (2016-2019), this case study also examines stakeholders’ perceptions about sustainability and how lessons learned from phase one are contributing to delivery in phase two.

¹ www.baittime.to/meet-us

² Consilium Research and Consultancy. 2016. Evaluation of bait (Creative People and places South East Northumberland Interim Report.

³ www.baittime.to/meet-us



KEY FINDINGS

bait. Photo: Lisa Culling

- bait has commissioned different projects to unlock ‘social energy’ that have successfully supported people to come together to make positive changes for their communities.
- By using the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS⁴) tool which measures mental wellbeing (feeling good and functioning well), bait has shown that through activities such as ‘Time to Enjoy’ (art taster sessions for people with mild-to-moderate mental health problems), peoples’ wellbeing improves, on average, by 16% over a 12 week period, highlighting the clear potential for the arts to improve wellbeing.
- Some of the social energy projects have been supported by bait to secure additional funding to continue their work outside of CPP to a total of almost £50,000. Sources including the Arts Council’s ‘Grants for the Arts’ programme, the Rayne Foundation and Bedlington Town Team are helping to sustain activities which use the arts to support the wellbeing of the local population.
- Having a health practitioner within bait has helped to broker relationships with the health sector to facilitate clear referral pathways into community arts projects. This has been necessary to ensure that those with mild-to-moderate mental health problems (who are often unlikely to engage in the arts) can access the provision. The investment of Northumberland County Council’s Public Health team in funding an Arts for Wellbeing manager – alongside playing an active role in the programme’s consortium – has therefore been pivotal to bait’s success in improving wellbeing across SE Northumberland.

⁴ The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being scale was developed to enable the monitoring of mental wellbeing in the general population and the evaluation of projects, programmes and policies which aim to improve mental wellbeing - www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/med/research/platform/wemwbs/



bait. Photo: Jason Thompson

INTRODUCTION

SE Northumberland is an area characterised by pockets of high deprivation, with many Lower Layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs) in places such as Ashington, Cramlington, Bedlington and Blyth being in the most deprived 10% of such areas in England.⁵ Many of the villages and towns in the area were built around the mining, fishing and shipping industries, but the decline of industry (particularly coal mining) had a devastating impact on the area, resulting in high levels of worklessness and associated issues such as poor mental and physical health, substance and alcohol misuse and high levels of youth offending.⁶ In particular, levels of long-term mental health problems are higher in Northumberland than the national average (5.6% of the adult population as opposed to 4.3% in England)⁷. Prior to CPP, much of the lack of engagement in the arts was due to low levels of ambition, aspiration and feelings of disenfranchisement from society.⁸

Despite these social and economic issues, there is a strong sense of community in the area and many community groups operate within the villages and towns. Prior to CPP however, these community groups tended to operate in isolation and the local arts infrastructure was poor. There were very few arts venues within easy reach for communities, with the nearest concentration of arts venues being in Newcastle and Gateshead. The lack of arts – and general – infrastructure is an ongoing point of contention for local residents; for example in 2015, almost 2,000 people came together for the ‘Make a Noise for Bedlington’ campaign to protest against the lack of investment in Bedlington by the local authority.

“In Bedlington they have no leisure centre, and little art infrastructure.

So Bedlington struggles. They’ve got a lack in cultural and creative venues – they’ve only got the community centre really.” Arts for Wellbeing Manager

⁵ Rowe, S. 2015. Northumberland Knowledge Research Report: English Indices of Deprivation 2015: Northumberland Analysis. [online] www.northumberland.gov.uk/NorthumberlandCountyCouncil/media/Northumberland-Knowledge/NK%20place/Indices%20of%20deprivation/Northumberland-ID-2015.pdf

⁶ bait. 2012. Creative People and Places: South East Northumberland Business Plan.

⁷ Public Health England.

fingertips.phe.org.uk/profile-group/mental-health/profile/cmhp/data#page/1/gid/8000053/pat/46/par/E39000027/ati/19/are/E38000130

⁸ bait. 2012. Creative People and Places: South East Northumberland Business Plan.

APPROACH TO IMPROVING SOCIAL ENERGY

Through a range of activities bait has brought together different partners, from health and wellbeing practitioners to local community groups to support the broader aim of improving the wellbeing of the local population through engaging people in the arts, whilst also helping people to come together to make a positive change in their community.

A key partner of the consortium that is delivering bait is Northumberland County Council Public Health, which has funded an Arts for Wellbeing Manager, whose role is to broker partnerships between a range of health, wellbeing, arts and community organisations to support bait's overall mission. The role oversees the three aforementioned strands of wellbeing activities – family, recovery and social energy – with the aim of ensuring that people who are not currently accessing art can start to engage with it.

“[The aim is] to make sure that people who have got mild to moderate mental health concerns – so you’re dealing with depression, anxiety – can access art for their wellbeing.” Arts for Wellbeing Manager

The programme has also been supported by Creative Connectors – freelancer paid roles who act as a conduit between bait, the projects and the general public - whose role is to support people from a range of backgrounds to be involved in the arts and to help unlock social energy in communities.

One of the first bait projects that helped communities to work together to create positive change, was called The Share and was based in the working men’s club in the village of Guide Post. Although initially an arts project that explored members’ day-to-day life through photography and ceramics, the project also led to a professional 4-month exhibition at Woodhorn Museum. The development work in Guide Post social club created unanticipated levels of social engagement, and inspired participants to develop their own arts and crafts group that then continued to operate on a weekly basis. The Share was one of the first in a series of work around increasing social energy in communities.

“bait was very interested, in that the project – and my way of working – generated outcomes that were not foreseen, and that very much sat with their idea of social energy, this idea of arts practice and engagement in the arts being able to release an energy, or an activism within a community, and to empower them to do something for themselves that they maintain and own.” Curator

bait has commissioned a range of social energy projects, from ad-hoc taster sessions to longer-term projects. In 2014, bait launched the ‘Time to Enjoy’ project, which comprised of three 12-week groups in Ashington, Bedlington and Cramlington, that encouraged people to try new arts activities. The groups were designed for people with mild-to-moderate mental health problems, to help increase their confidence, develop their skills and improve their sense of wellbeing. Through utilising partnerships with organisations in various health and social care settings, referrals could be made directly from social and health practitioners, or alternatively people were able to self-refer into the groups.

An example of a longer-term project that has been delivered through bait is based in the Hirst community of Ashington. Hirst is an important area for the heritage of the coal mining industry and at its centre is Hirst Park, which, in Victorian times, represented the ‘clean lungs’ of the community; a place where people could go to rest and relax. The park therefore has a strong connection to wellbeing and the Hirst project draws on this historical significance and aims to get artists to build on existing activities in the park – growing, gardening and social activities – and support the community to use the experience to ‘unlock’ social energy. The Hirst project is ongoing, and has brought several artists, including a photographer and sculptors, to work with the community to engage them in the arts. The lead of the Hirst project also brought local community groups together to develop and deliver a community event in the park, called ‘Party in the Park’.

OUTCOMES

A range of outcomes have been delivered across bait that are linked to the theme of using the arts to help residents to come together to make positive change. The 'Time to Enjoy' groups were successful in engaging a range of people with mild-to-moderate mental health issues; the groups had an "overwhelming response" from partners referring people into the group, with 317 participant engagements⁹ across the three geographical areas. bait also recorded wellbeing outcomes for 'Time to Enjoy' groups, using the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) tool, and found that at the end of the 12 week groups, there had been an average increase in participant wellbeing of 16%.

Although the groups were a success in terms of engaging people in the arts and increasing wellbeing, they were not financially sustainable beyond the 12 weeks, so bait needed to explore ways in which they could continue to be funded. At the end of the last session, a donation box was set up to ascertain if people had a desire to continue the groups, and although donations could not cover all the costs, it was a good way to gauge peoples' interest and commitment to the arts.

In Bedlington, the group was keen to sustain its activities so bait supported it to develop its own application to the Arts Council's Grants for the Arts, through which they successfully secured £13,000 for the 'Bedlington Creatives' project. This was viewed as a big success, in that the group had the confidence and capacity to put in a bid for a grant, as well as move towards being able to generate their own funding. In total, groups that have worked with bait have been supported to secure almost £50,000 of external funding to date.

"The Time to Enjoy groups were kind of like a catalyst to test and grow." Arts for Wellbeing Manager

The original plan for the Bedlington arts group was to expand the work done through the Time to Enjoy group and take the arts to other members of the community; such as into care homes or carers organisations. However, due to various logistical issues with getting the group and the art materials to the care homes, the project has mainly operated from Bedlington Community Centre, but art produced by people living in care homes feeds into the projects that the group presents.

"We're trying to involve them [Bedlington residents] as much as we can, without it becoming a whole other project that we run on the side." Bedlington project lead

Many of the participants of the Bedlington project are retired or are lone parents. Participants reported that the key outcomes of being involved are increased confidence to try new art forms, a greater feeling of involvement in the community, and having the opportunity to do something more with their day.

"If you're feeling a bit reluctant [to go out], it's [having the group there] a reason for coming and doing something." Bedlington group member

"And not working any more, it [the project] adds an extra dimension to what you're doing in your day." Bedlington group member

⁹. Consilium Research and Consultancy. 2016. Evaluation of the bait Creative People and Places Programme: Final report. <http://www.creativepeopleplaces.org.uk/sites/default/files/bait%20Evaluation%20Report%20Years%201-3.pdf>

“For me, it’s a chance to experience something I’ve never done before, which has been interesting. There have been some things I’ve been rubbish at and others that I have thoroughly enjoyed.” Bedlington group member

Taking part in a range of taster activities, from animation to print-making to origami, has inspired group members to keep engaging in the arts and try out new art forms. The project staff commented that during the past year there has been a clear shift in the dynamics of the group; the group have become more ambitious with what they want to achieve and how they want to shape their activities, highlighting their ownership of the group.

“I think particularly over the last few weeks, what I’m picking up from the group as a whole, is kind of they want to expand more. I think towards the earlier stages, it was like, we maybe doing some printing or painting... but now it’s more about, ‘how much further can we go with this?’ I think there is more of a need for exploration.” Creative Connector

“There’s something about trying something new that’s really energising.” Bedlington group member

The empowerment of group members to shape and lead on activities is something that another of bait’s social energy projects, The Hirst, has also demonstrated. Although The Hirst project is ongoing, early outcomes around group ownership have emerged, highlighting the potential for people who live in the area to facilitate real, sustained change.

For example, the ‘Party in the Park’ community event was conceptualised, developed and delivered by the local community, with support from the curator of The Hirst project. The event was “really successful”; about 200 people went along over the course of the day and they engaged in a number of arts activities. The most successful activity was set up by Ashington-based photographer, Mik Critchlow, who offered to take portraits of dogs and their owners in exchange for people leaving their name and contact details to be involved in another artist’s work for the project, as well as become a member of the Heart of Hirst community group. As many people in the Hirst have dogs and use the park for walking their dogs, the activity was a really effective method of engaging people and unlocking social energy; 28 people joined the Heart of Hirst community group, of which five are now active members, involved in organising events and developing a strategy for building up interest for an arts residency in the area, which will be delivered by visual artists Walker and Bromwich.

As the social energy projects have ranged from short (12 weeks) to long-term (2 years) there have been a variety of outcomes, from increased reach and confidence in engaging in the arts, to increased capacity of community groups to bid for grants and behaviour change amongst members, who have shown a greater willingness to lead on – and take ownership of – the work.



WHAT WORKED WELL

- › Having Northumberland County Council Public Health as a consortium member and key funding source for the delivery of bait's 'arts for wellbeing' mission has been pivotal to the success of engaging people from places of least engagement in the arts. In particular, the partnership has enabled bait to establish links with key health and wellbeing organisations across SE Northumberland to refer people who experience mild-to-moderate mental health problems, supporting them to engage in projects that are being held in their local community. Having a health practitioner embedded in the bait delivery team has been advantageous for supporting people to traverse across the different groups and projects, and ensuring that the projects are developed and delivered in a way that empowers group members and helps them experience the wellbeing benefits of being involved.

“We’re doing it with them [the community] not to them. And from a wellbeing and therapeutic perspective, you must collaborate and walk with the person, not in front of them.” Arts for Wellbeing Manager

- › At the project-level, feedback from staff and participants alike suggested that the success of their project was due to having a central lead or facilitator who could spearhead the project to ensure that the social energy could be maintained. Comparing the bait-commissioned group to other groups they are involved in, group members highlighted that a lead person can help to keep the 'spark' between group members, inspiring them to continue with a project and explore the arts further.

“You need to have people who spark off each other; it’s when a group loses that spark and you haven’t got somebody who is there to give it that kick up the backside to get going again.” Bedlington group member

Having a central lead did not compromise the level of ownership the group had; instead it helped in co-ordinating actions agreed by group members who had expressed their views and opinions about how the project should continue.

LESSONS LEARNT

- › Across the programme, project staff and Creative Connectors have learned that, as many people involved in the 'social energy' projects have complex lives, with issues around mental health, substance misuse and poverty, there is a need to be flexible and mindful that individual engagement might fluctuate depending on personal circumstances. The learning has therefore been around how projects are structured; as long as there is an end goal for the project, it does not matter if the path to that point is not as expected, as long as people are supported to continue their engagement.

“You have to be quite creative, flexible and keep your eye on the end point. And the end point is producing work, engaging people, and supporting that community to be empowered. To feel that their voice has been heard, they have been respected, and that the thing they have been involved in has been enjoyable and pleasurable and has inspired them at the end to do something else.” Curator

- › Another lesson learned for engaging with communities who have not previously engaged in the arts is about the need for time. Across the interviews, it was clear that spending time building up relationships and trust with the target community is a prerequisite for expecting them to have sustained engagement with the arts to improve their longer-term wellbeing. Collaborating with communities to develop activities that they want to see and participate in – such as the Party in the Park in Hirst – is necessary to achieve changes in behaviour.

“Really understanding the area where you work is absolutely crucial. Collaborating with them is important or we’re not going to get people accessing. And it takes a long time for people to go ‘that’s amazing for my community, I’m going to be a part of it.’” Arts for Wellbeing Manager

Collaborating with communities is not just about consulting with them about the arts activities that they want to see; for a practitioner coming into the area, it is also about demonstrating their commitment to the area and their investment in the community.

“The most important aspect of an arts project with a ‘less engaged’ community is time... You need time to earn peoples’ trust, and you also have to demonstrate that you are genuine... so if they have an event you have to say you’ll go along and help with the sandwiches, or make the tea... and when you say it’s an equal partnership, and that when they work with you that they’ll be part of the decision-making, you also have to prepared to get your hands dirty with them... so it’s about time and it’s about reciprocity.” Curator

ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE

For many of the stakeholders who have been involved in the social energy projects, it was difficult to say if excellence in the arts has been achieved to date because a lot of the work was around encouraging people to engage. In addition, there were some tensions around what ‘excellence’ means for different stakeholders; for some it is a difficult term to conceptualise in relation to the project because ‘excellence’ is perceived to be a subjective and depends on the views of beneficiaries. Many

“In terms of excellence, I think that people will have an excellent experience, but it will be defined on their own terms.” Curator

Many stakeholders highlighted a recent exhibition - that was directly inspired by the Weeping Window at Woodhorn Museum in 2015 - in the Bedlington Community Centre for Remembrance Sunday, in which a trail of poppies (handmade by the community group and other members of the community) flowed out of a first floor window of the centre to the ground below. The exhibition was enjoyed by many local residents coming to view it. Stakeholders reported that people were driving past and stopping in the street to view the art work, and community group members highlighted the pride that they felt with the exhibition.

To further understand and achieve artistic excellence and excellence in engagement across the wider programme, bait has developed a 'quality framework', which comprises ten elements that projects should aim to achieve. Developed through consultations with bait staff and the project's Critical Friend, the framework provides a benchmark to assess and discuss the quality of bait projects, ranging from artistic factors (such as the concept, meaning, production and performance) to engagement factors (collaborative ownership, raised aspirations and curiosity) as well as sustainability and replicability.¹⁰ The framework has been used across all social energy projects to ensure that leads can assess the quality of their work.

UNLOCKING SOCIAL ENERGY

The Party in the Park is a key example of a project which has successfully unlocked social energy; encouraging more people to get involved in their community. The various community groups involved in developing the project - Heart of Hirst, Ashington Community Cinema, Koast Radio and Men's Sheds - utilised their existing links to draw local people to the event, developing arts activities - like the dog and owner portraits - that would 'hook' people in and engage them. As a result of the success of the project, the community groups have been inspired to continue to hold an annual community arts event in the park, indicating a sustained interest and engagement in the arts at the grass-roots level.

"The legacy of it [Hirst project] will be this development, this taking what's already there, and supporting those groups to work together to create a new focus of tradition, and a new tradition for Hirst... that creates a community spirit for Hirst." Curator

TRANSFERABILITY

Across the different stakeholders, there was an agreement that the basic 'arts for health and wellbeing' model could be transferred to other places, but the type of partners needed to deliver the project would depend on the local context and the types of health problems that need to be addressed (physical health, mental health or wellbeing). For example, SE Northumberland is an area with high levels of mental health problems, so the 'Arts for Wellbeing' role comes from a therapeutic/counselling support role, whereas another area might necessitate a physical health specialist. However, to improve wellbeing through an arts project, it is advisable for there to be a designated professional from the health sector who can bring practical experience to the project, alongside existing links with a range of health partners.

"So if other CPP areas want to increase participation in areas of least engagement, then they need to be linking in with these people [health partners]." Arts for Wellbeing Manager

¹⁰ bait. 2014. bait Quality Guidelines.

www.creativepeopleplaces.org.uk/sites/default/files/bait%20Quality%20Guidelines_0.pdf

SUSTAINABILITY

The projects that have been developed to unlock social energy in communities across SE Northumberland have achieved a myriad of outcomes, but they are all in different stages of development, which has implications for how they will be sustained going forwards. Some groups are looking at how they can continue accessing arts funding independently of bait, to set themselves up as a self-sustaining arts group. For example, Bedlington Creatives would like to start applying for funding as an arts group, rather than through the community centre, so they can access small-scale grants for individual projects. They are also trying to decide if they can sustain the group through charging people a small fee, or asking for donations, so that they are able to bring in new artists who can maintain group members' inspiration so they can continue to make positive change in their community.

“A bit of a stumbling block sustainability-wise, is how to be able to afford to get that extra input in... you need someone who can come in and look at things in a different way.” Project leader

Other projects will take longer to be self-sustaining and are still in need of support from a professional to guide and support the group. For example, more work is needed to sustain work in The Hirst; as an area with long-term lack of engagement in the arts, professionals need to continue to work closely with the community to build up their trust and to develop activities that reflect the needs of the community. This will help to ensure that people will engage in the arts over the long-term, thus improving their sense of wellbeing.

“For me this is a long-term development and I would aspire to see behaviour change, to see Hirst become something very different in other peoples' eyes as well as their own.” Arts for Wellbeing Manager

Aside from securing funding, a clear theme emerging from all the stakeholder groups was the desire to link up the community and arts groups across SE Northumberland so that they can work collaboratively to unlock social energy on a larger scale, ultimately encouraging more people to engage with the arts. For some beneficiaries, working with other community groups would provide them with an additional source of inspiration, to help them to continue the work they are doing. For project and bait staff, working with other communities might enable groups to pool resources to help sustain their work. This aspiration among groups to link with others requires brokerage, and this is something that will weave throughout the second phase of the bait programme through to 2019, with the ambition of leaving a more networked infrastructure for the arts in SE Northumberland.



bait. Photo: Jason Thompson

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