



Leading a City Differently: the Arts, Partnership and Public Services

A background paper

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Introduction:

This paper describes the predominantly arts-led work undertaken by The RSA and The Map Consortium to support collaborative leadership and the culture of public service delivery in Peterborough during 2011 – 2012 and beyond. It offers a summary outline for those considering creative practice as an approach to reshaping relationships between key institutions, people, and services. Within a context of competing needs and sharply decreasing financial resources, there is no choice but to innovate by exploring new ways of working together, which in turn prioritises the building of trust and co-operation. It is no longer a nice thing to have but a fundamental way of delivering public services.

Behaviours matter more than words. If local authorities want to promote deeper more generous relationships between citizens then councils' own practice must reflect this.¹

The roots of the programme:

In 2011 Peterborough's local strategic partnership, the Greater Peterborough Partnership (GPP) launched an ambitious ten year transformation agenda with a set of underlying principles requiring a substantial shift of culture in city-wide service delivery, the Single Delivery Plan (please see appendix for a description of the plan and its key principles). The RSA and The Map Consortium, already working together in the city through the Citizen Power Programme, proposed establishing an Innovation Forum to support and accelerate this culture change. The ambition of this programme was to foster a new city-wide leadership ethos, inspire innovative working practice and in particular, to engage the arts and other practical, creative processes to help make this happen.

Creative practice draws on the thinking, processes and structures of the arts (such as theatre, visual art and curatorial practice) as channels and catalysts for defining new ways of working. In the context of the Innovation forum this involved a carefully designed and facilitated range of techniques, exercises and structures, offering participants a distinct experience of themselves, each other, and their work. Habit and the ongoing pressures of delivery make it hard for leaders, however responsible and diligent, to step outside their existing parameters. Creative, arts-led facilitation was pivotal to this leadership uncovering their own potential, developing new relationships and revealing the possibilities existing in the city. The Map and RSA team had a mandate to offer an 'invited disturbance' within a carefully constructed programme.

¹, J.Birdwell, F.Farook, S. Jones; Trust in Practice DEMOS; 2010;
<http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/trustinpractice>

The rationale for working with creativity:

Working through the arts allows us to imagine and experience differently. It can support reflection on our behaviours in a space that is non-judgemental and helps to develop tools that can sustain new ways of being together ‘differently’. Building trust requires going beyond a rational interaction and recognising the complexity of how we interact, the role of our own emotions and the importance of empathy. Innovation Forum participants adopted the following slogan to highlight the rationale for working in this way. *Being together differently, in order to do together differently.*

The rationale for working with creative practice as a methodology for the forum had several aspects:

1. To escape ‘business as usual’: With an economic and social context demanding significant change, Peterborough’s leadership recognized that existing modes of working were unlikely or unable to produce ideas or ways of working that would be genuinely transformational. A new mindset about leading the city was required. *“It’s made us reflect on ourselves rather than running forward everyday as we always do.”* Pat Carrington: Principal, Peterborough City College.
2. To experience difference: To appreciate what it takes to operate differently, it is necessary to experience what it feels like in the first place. Creative practice provided unfamiliar activity and processes requiring these refreshed mindsets, attitudes and approaches. Adjusting to experiment and becoming fluent in new ways of working prepared leaders for the dynamics involved in innovation and change. *“It’s been really illuminating and I’ve done things with colleagues that I never would have dreamt of doing.”* Sue Mitchell: Assistant Director, Public Health, NHS Peterborough.
3. To reconfigure relationships: A key principle underpinning the SDP’s ambition includes prioritising city-wide outcomes over the individual agendas of different organisations. Creative practice placed ‘experts’ on a level playing field, where human resourcefulness (ability to imagine, communicate, collaborate, adapt) became the valuable commodity, rather than position or rank. In this environment, new connections, conversations and ideas can flourish. *“We’ve been asked to do some really different things and yet it’s felt like a comfortable, trusting environment to work in.”* Rachel Huxley: Chief Executive, Peterborough Environment City Trust.
4. To access the full potential of the leadership: Working with creative practice has revealed unexpected qualities, skills and assets that might be invisible in the ordinary transaction of business. These might be personal or organizational, and their visibility can shift perceptions of people or organisations that directly unlock possibilities for change. *“We’ve been able to make some really lateral links.”* Alison Reid: Assistant Director, Specialist Services at Cambridgeshire Community NHS Trust.

Key dynamics, principles and strategies:

The following qualities, strategies and principles, threaded into the Map/RSA design and facilitation, emerged as central to establishing a distinct and innovative programme:

Patience: The understandable habit of needing to know the rationale behind activity quickly inhibits the possibility of discovery. New solutions are by definition unknown and need to be uncovered in unexpected ways or places. Encouraging leaders to engage in a process without knowing how (or even if) it adds value is a challenge that requires patience and the tolerance of doubt. The Innovation Forum guided participants not to leap to solving issues but to observe and explore them.

Enquiry: Broadening and deepening enquiry became a useful way to suspend reactive habits. The forum worked with questions and question generation as a way to examine and reframe the underlying issues and dynamics they needed to address.

Creativity: Working with arts stimuli such as images, metaphor, place, and performance gave participants a grounding in how new ways of expressing ideas can lead to new insights. Participants discovered how these active and indirect ways of sharing perspectives and interpreting ideas opened up new opportunities. They also recognised their ability to achieve surprising and unexpected results, which in turn, generated belief in their capacity to do the same in their work leading the city together.

Structure: Creating temporary and often artificial structures for dialogue, thinking and working together was vital to ensure different, inclusive and efficient contributions into the forum. The usual voices and perspectives were not privileged in these structures, and when heard were appreciated in new ways. The forum came to appreciate how rigorous creative structures can unlock unexpected ideas, and how disrupting the norms of operation helps bypass sterile habits.

Collaboration: The forum validated the value of perspectives from outside of participants' immediate professional expertise in imagining change. It encouraged leaders to be generous in engaging with each other's and the city's challenges even when not directly responsible for them, trusting that the reciprocal experience would be valuable. Concern for and investment in one's own and others professional development as leaders of the city cemented this emphasis. A high premium was placed on practicing the ways of being and operating which support real collaboration, often through engaging with collaborative arts process as a stimulus.

Place: The forum attempted to re-acquaint participants with the city and its people. Small steps towards this included locating each forum event or learning group in different, sometimes unfamiliar, places (e.g. City museum, community spaces, fire station, park) and making visits into the city together to share knowledge about hidden successes and trouble-spots.

The Innovation Forum framework:

The Map and the RSA led on the design of all aspects of the programme in consultation with the Greater Peterborough Partnership and forum members. Its structure offered participants a variety of opportunities to work together in large and small groups in a wide variety of locations with a careful balance of experimentation and reflection.

Elements of the programme comprised of:

A) Forum events: Six were held across the year (four were 1.5 days, two, 1 day) themed as follows: Conditions for Change & Innovation; Perceptions of Place; Leading Innovation; Engagement; Facilitative Leadership; Sustaining Innovation.

These events comprised a carefully facilitated blend of creative practice, external speakers, reflective discussions and the application of learning to everyday issues and relationships. Contributing speakers included Hilary Cottam from Participiple, Joanna Rajkowska, an artist working in the public realm, and Franco Bianchini, Professor in Cultural Planning and Policy, Leeds Metropolitan University.

B) Learning groups: Eight cross-sector groups of 6-8 people were established to embed learning from the forum events. These met between each forum event and were initially facilitated by the Map and RSA team, and then groups self-facilitated. Launched around a self-selected enquiry, groups structured sessions to respond to this enquiry and undertook experiments together. Two examples of this are:

- One group worked with film to explore how green space is used in the city which in turn, prompted the Nene Park Trust's Chief Executive to reframe plans for a major capital project on the site.
- Another developed a 'challenge toolkit' for bypassing entrenched cultural 'blocks' to offer back to the forum. Participants particularly valued this opportunity to discuss their individual challenges alongside peers from outside their organisations. Many visited each other's workplace to act as an 'outside eye' or critical friend.

C) Conversation: Individuals were supported to apply new approaches in dialogue with Map and RSA facilitators. A protected website enabled forum members to share reflections and experimentation.

D) Dialogue in Action: This project offered self-selected groups the opportunity to work on relevant issues in partnership with creative/artist associates from Peterborough. Feedback identified the key successes of the project were due to working "with areas of ownership" and not "delivery to another agenda" with "fresh eyes on old problems." Four of these projects took place involving ten different organisations and five creative/artist associates:

- Falls: a project crossing public health, voluntary services and adult education to address the challenges presented by reducing risks of falls in the home. *"A multi-agency approach was used to successfully bid for funds that have enabled measures to be put in place very quickly to try and reduce the number of older people becoming ill or dying from the extreme cold this winter. None of us could have achieved this result working in isolation. This is another example of how working in collaboration can help to generate adequate funding and implement solutions quickly and effectively."*²

² David Bache, Chief Executive of AGE UK Peterborough

- Engaging school leaders in the Peterborough Learning Partnership: led by a headteacher involved in the Peterborough Curriculum strand of Citizen Power in order to create a meaningful engagement from other schools leaders by believing in and committing to reciprocal partnerships. The creative practitioner was the catalyst to provide a dedicated space to do so and generate dynamic ideas with the team.
- The Neighbourhood Project: Instigated by a local Councillor to encourage greater civic engagement and community cohesion and to bring about partnership working with a designated local area. The council's neighbourhood team worked closely with the creative associate who brought local artists to the project with the creative skills to engage a community. They worked with photography, distributing cameras within the community to surface residents' own perspectives on the neighbourhood. This work has now been recognised for the innovative approaches taken, and the ability of the project to engage with new people. Other local Councillors are keen to use the same techniques again, especially in areas of emerging tension or where single issues are dominating an area. The project has levered further local funding so that the artists can design the final artistic outcome which will be displayed locally.
- The Sharing Success Project: led by the Principal of the Community College, the General Secretary of the Voluntary Services and leaders within the NHS Executive locally, the project built a small team across health and learning sectors to look closely at what has worked and why and consider how to record those characteristics. The creative practitioner supported this collaboration to compare and contrast across the sectors, providing the opportunity to reflect through creative practice. *“Working with the creative practice has allowed us to cascade a new way of thinking to managers within our organisations, but also this programme has also developed us, the facilitators to gain new skills in this area. The creative practitioner has harnessed our natural abilities and given us permission to try new things.”*³

Learning from the Innovation Forum:

Engagement in the programme was encouraging. Perhaps most significant is that a second phase of the Forum has been requested by its members and is going ahead with an increased and wider membership for a further year. Attendance in all organised activities (Forum events and learning groups) was consistent at 75% and above. Many smaller self-selecting partnerships were formed and undertook initiatives as a result of Forum connections or activities. Similarly, most members reported new relationships bearing fruit in relation to their 'day jobs', with support or refreshed ideas occurring.

Significant learning in relation to engaging the leadership has highlighted:

- Creative practice as a methodology needs practice and persistence to embed; a strong rationale for this distinct approach needs restating often. Subtle and skilled external facilitation is key to placing this work in this context.
- The Forum had to dedicate enough time to working differently in order to make a difference, though time pressure meant that participants sometimes had to disengage and re-engage.
- Consistent attendance by senior leaders attracts and maintains other's engagement.
- Skills and leadership development work needs to be balanced alongside application into the daily context. If the balance tips too far either way, some parties disengage. This insight has informed the structuring of the second year of the forum, which looks to blend more application into the process as the forum gains momentum and confidence.

³ Pat Carrington: Principal, Peterborough City College

- Small group work cements and produces unexpected alliances and engagement.
- The need for meaningful measurement tools that can chart this journey.

What participants highlighted one year on:

Shift in mindset and culture:

“I enjoy the fact that we can now be so open with each other in terms of current issues, and how we challenge each other to do more, do differently- or just see the positives in times of difficulty. It’s already changed the way I approach and package some of my projects, and how I see the wider city leadership role we all have.” James McCulloch, Chief Executive, Nene Park Trust.

Relationships and access: problem solving:

“An excellent case of leading by example for cutting bureaucracy was demonstrated through the work. A current example of how bureaucracy was blocking a good cohesion initiative was raised at a forum learning group and as a result the hurdle was not only removed but additional benefits are now possible to over 20 community groups.” Jawaid Khan, Cohesion Manager, Peterborough City Council.

On experimenting with creative practice:

“The overwhelming learning for me was the impact of creating an opportunity and simply allowing and trusting the team to work with it in their own way – creating high energy – and that is where the learning is for them as well.” Sue Mitchell, Assistant Director, Public Health, NHS Peterborough.

On a sense of empowerment:

“The last innovation forum was a real inspiration for us all. I certainly went away believing that we can make difference in Peterborough, and I particularly love the mantra “We have the will, the power and the ability...” David Bache, Chief Executive, Age UK.

“The depth and breadth of the experience so far is certainly touching my day to day business with plenty of bold steps being taken - and far better results as a consequence!” Adrian Chapman, Director of Communities, Peterborough City Council.

Summary:

“I am confident that we will continue the work in a creative way. It is remarkable the impact it has made on all of us.” Gillian Beasley, Chief Executive, Peterborough City Council.

There have been three distinct factors in this programme that reveal how shifts in leadership will lead to innovative change in service delivery:

- the methodology of creative practice that seeks to build trust and integration of new ways of behaving together into new ways of working
- the carefully selected diversity of participants crossing public, voluntary and private domains
- integrating both the diversity of participants and the methodology of creative practice within a larger framework of innovation that the city leadership is committed to over a period of a decade thus allowing this work to be embedded and sustained.

Joe Hallgarten, Director of Education at the RSA in his paper, *Speaking Doubt to Power* asks: “*Could art play a role at every stage of the policymaking process, from re-imagining problems, to generating ideas, to reflecting on policy decisions? Could policymakers engage with art as a way of stress-testing a policy idea pre-formulation, exploring the unintended consequences before the unstoppable force of policy meets the immovable object of human behaviour? Can it provide a reality check on ‘optimism bias’ and ‘anchoring effects’, where our first impressions are excessively influential and optimistic? Above all, if policymakers engage with art as evidence, could it catalyse some of the cultural changes that are so needed, in particular mitigating the worst instincts of positivism?*”⁴

The Innovation Forum programme created the intellectual, practical and emotional space for those involved to reflect critically, thus building the capacity for future work of this nature. This programme of intersecting opportunities produced a rich and diverse set of distinct experiences offering shared reference points at the Forum events and specific individual applications of learning through the follow-on projects.

Liz Forgan, the recent Chair of Arts Council England, said at the first State of the Arts conference in 2010, hosted by ACE and the RSA: “*We must find partners we never knew we had.*” The Innovation Forum has been a response to this call, stretching far beyond the arts sector and offers a framework for innovation with creative practice at its core.

But perhaps, most importantly, this programme evidently required the willingness of each participant to step outside their usual working patterns and challenge themselves, in the presence of peers and in many cases, their managers. This necessitated the consistent application of courage, something that would not be sustained if this bravery was not producing valued results.

The first phase of the Forum systematically introduced participants to ways of developing these capacities together, predominantly through creative practice. The next stage of the programme will focus more upon the application of these skills within each leader’s teams and agencies, ensuring that what is learned at a leadership level can be passed onwards and eventually be applied to practice on the ground.

⁴ Hallgarten, J. (2011), *Speaking doubt to power: Art as evidence for public policymaking*. *Public Policy Research*, 18: 235–242. doi: 10.1111/j.1744-540X.2012.00671

Appendix A

Peterborough's Single Delivery Plan:

The SDP responds both to the climate of change in public service delivery and an impetus toward citywide collaboration and innovation and provides:

- A single, easily expressed innovative agenda for Peterborough that connects key partners in the city during significant organisational change.
- A framework to facilitate 'whole-systems' transformation of service delivery across a place (not just within organisations), in order to achieve a sustainable community.

It has multiple programmes of work addressing common themes including cohesive communities, effective resourcing, jobs & skills, reducing crime, health & sustainability, with five guiding principles:

1. Outcomes, not organisations
2. Addressing the root cause of issues – a preventative agenda
3. Innovation – doing things differently for less
4. Prioritisation – clear focus, not everything we do
5. A vehicle for joint delivery by and with all.

Appendix B: Partners and participants

The partners:

Designing and guiding the forum drew on a creative alliance between three partners; the RSA, The Map Consortium and the Greater Peterborough Partnership, each bringing different perspectives to the programme. The GPP located partners and leaders within the city, held the links to the SDP, and advised on the strategic direction of the forum. Alongside its public policy expertise, the RSA brought experience of Peterborough's public engagement process, and an understanding of the role of the arts in social change, through its central role in the Citizen Power Programme. The Map Consortium contributed a unique track record of working with creative practice and facilitation to transform leadership across sectors at senior levels.

Participants came from the following sectors:

Peterborough City Council (senior leaders from most key departments); Police; Peterborough Hospital; NHS; PCT; Fire & Rescue Service; private sector (e.g. Serco, Enterprise); Housing Association; business leaders, Leisure, Sport and Culture Trust, voluntary organisations (e.g. MIND); faith groups; Public Health; Community Services; elected Council Members; Schools, Higher and Further education; Environmental agencies; Park Trust; Enterprise agencies.