Leeds 2023

My World, My City, My Neighbourhood

Evaluation: Executive Summary

September 2022

A note on sources for this report

This summary report is based on research and analysis carried out by The Audience Agency consultancy team, in their capacity as Leeds 2023 evaluation partners with the Centre for Cultural Value, University of Leeds. This research incorporated a range of different methods, including a participant survey. As the participant survey sample size was small, these findings were supplemented by additional secondary research and analysis interviews and email exchanges, as well as analysis of extant reports on the co-creative aspects of the programme (based on interviews/observations), qualitative and quantitative artist reports across all 22 projects and participant research conducted by artists and shared with The Audience Agency team. In particular, this report cites from, with permission, findings from Key Learnings: My World, My City, My Neighbourhood, a report circulated internally in July 2022 and authored by Dr Lynn Wray, who was co-commissioned by Leeds 2023 and Horizons Institute, University of Leeds, to evaluate the programme's co-creation approach. This summary report outlines key findings from the full internal evaluation report produced by The Audience Agency of the My World, My City, My Neighbourhood programme.

Due to the varied nature of each of the project's approach, aims, models of working and activities, capturing the breadth of experiences and impacts of the MWMCMN projects was a challenge. As the Key Learnings report points out: 'evaluation of co-creation/participatory practice needs to be done differently to evaluation focussed on experience of audiences as the journey is significantly longer. Ideally evaluation would be longitudinal and follow the projects from the beginning as it is the quality of the process and the participant journey which is of central importance' [Wray 2022, p.2]. In addition to the differing contexts and impacts of each project, this report places a point of emphasis on the interdependency of the experiences of artists and participants across each project.

Key Facts & Figures: My World, My City, My Neighbourhood

- In total, 165 artists were involved in the delivery of 22 projects across the My World, My City, My Neighbourhood programme (MWMCMN) which ran from November 2021 – May 2022.
- In total 2105 participants took part in the 22 projects as participants, with an additional 3735 taking part as an audience members (e.g. at community sharing events or performances).
- Project activity delivered by lead artists across the programme included workshops, meetings and the production, exhibition and/or distribution of collaborative and community artworks which were often exhibited or performed at public events and sharings at the end of the projects.
- These artworks included the writing and performance of collective poems, the improvisation of live music performances, the production of co-written publications and maps of communities and the local area, murals in the local area and art and craft installations and exhibitions.
- Prominent themes that emerged across the programme included growing a community / gardening, walking as a route to thinking differently about your place, finding community in liminal spaces, how to create safe spaces for cultural activity and the power of making (crafting) together as a means of connecting [Wray 2022, pp. 2-3].
- One of the key aims of the MWMCMN programme was to develop a better understanding of sustainable co-creative models of working. The full report details some of the impacts of the project on artists and their future practice and the challenges they experienced; not least as a result of the Covid pandemic restrictions that were still in place and the uncertainty that caused around future lockdowns.

Key aspects of programme design & delivery

"The idea that the artists leading the projects would already be living or working within, and thus embedded in the community that they were working with, was the unique value of the MWMCMN strand that differed from the standard commissioning of co-creation activities."

Wray 2022, p.4

One of the defining features of the My World, My City, My Neighbourhood programme was the employment of lead artists that lived within, or formed part of, the communities that engaged through their projects. This had many benefits: from a practical perspective, those artists who had existing relationships with communities generally needed less time to build trust and relationships within communities and so could often manage the project more effectively within the short timeline' [Wray 2022, p.5]. They were also able to facilitate access to community spaces that may have otherwise been closed or inaccessible to those who were not members of that particular community. In addition, in general, it

was observed that there was a 'more natural, non-hierarchical relationship between participants and attendees where the lead artists were from, lived within, or were an active member of that community' and where this was not the case, there was 'a discernibly different dynamic (a performer/audience, host/guest dynamic)' [Wray 2022, p.5].

The project approach depended on the artistic objectives of the lead artist: i.e. whether they were building on an existing community practice, or discovering new ways of working. For some lead artists, MWMCMN provided them with extra time and resource to explore a specific strand of practice that they had not explored before, whereas others had an established professional arts practice that they looked to transfer to a community they had not worked with before.

Despite artwork creation being a central point to many of the projects, the value of the projects was repeatedly emphasised in the lead artist reports as the processes of building relationships and developing ways of working, rather than the final end products themselves:

> *"We 'allowed people to try something new without too much pressure or weight on the 'outcome' of the task. There was a cumulative approach to making 'stuff' (poems, films, images, artwork, performance texts, creative writing…), which emphasised the importance of 'process' over 'product'."* [Artist report]

Participant modes of engagement across, and within, projects

On the whole survey respondents[1] reported that they were able to participate in a way that suited them, and that overall (bar one respondent) they enjoyed the project, achieving what they believed to be its original aims. There was also a general positive evaluation of the relevance of projects to communities, the inclusivity and accessibility of the projects, and that they were well organised, with clear communications.

The differences in project design, aims and context for each project detailed above significantly shaped the context for the experiences of participants, or intended co-creators, for each project and the roles that they played.

Many projects recognised the importance of offering a broad range of ways in which people could participate. One participant commented on the fact that the ability to drop in and out without there being any pressure for commitment was a useful access point for someone who had chronic health conditions:

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[1] Due to the low sample size of the participant survey [n=30], any percentages relating to survey responses included in this executive summary and full report should be read as indicative only. It is also worth noting that this survey only represents participants from 5 out of the 23 projects and should not be considered representative or participants in the programme as a whole.

"I have variable health and ability to attend things so the lack of requirement for a form commitment and ability to drop in and drop out as my health allowed with very little notice was a big plus for me." [Participant survey]

Some participants reported having more than one role in projects, and some of the project lead artists paid members of the community to fulfil certain roles to directly support the delivery of activity.

Impacts of projects on individuals

Many respondents to our survey reported feeling happy (96%) and proud (90%) of the project, with a sense of ownership (90%) over the project and what was achieved. Being able to develop new and existing skills (93%) and express themselves more effectively and creatively (90%) were also commonly-cited impacts.

The opportunity to develop creative skills was a commonly cited impact across the evaluation activity, with participants often appreciating the creation of what they described as a 'safe' and 'inclusive' space to try out something new or something they had not done before.

Other projects enabled exhibition opportunities for those with more developed artistic practices to further display and distribute their work, or to develop performance skills. For others with an established artistic or creative skill, projects enabled them to develop their skills in other areas, such as project management, leadership and working with young people.

Many participants described how the projects have shifted pre-conceived notions of how artistic and creative practice can be and should be for everyone. Again, there was a sense that the informal environment and well-facilitated activities by lead artists were crucial in providing the right conditions for this to occur.

Social and community impacts

Participants who responded to the survey generally agreed that participating in the project made them feel more a part of their community, with most agreeing that the projects had helped raise their awareness about existing cultural provision in their communities.

The majority of survey respondents felt that they had made new friends during the project, with a couple citing profound social impacts, such as improving their sense of wellbeing and reducing feelings of isolation. Some described how the impacts on themselves as individuals and their sense of being-in-a-community were interdependent, shaping one another:

"Everyone comes with their differences and these are thrown together. Every week there is a new topic raised, after listening to others you find that you have altered your perspective a little (or sometimes a lot!). You can see things from a different angle, and you discover 'uniqueness'. You discover how your perspective might be different… I believe that it definitely does help the communities (the small

communities inside the big communities) to come together.” [Participant, as quoted in an artist report]

Lead artists and participants alike talked of projects as opportunities to connect and deepen existing relationships within the community, especially given the ongoing impact of the pandemic. While not cited as a direct impact of the project, many participants described their intention to work in the community or get involved in a similar project in the future. Others felt their confidence to participate in wider civic and community life was improved.

For those projects that created artworks in community spaces, some participants described how they felt these artworks would provide a lasting artistic legacy for projects in their communities, while others acknowledged the direct impact their project had on local infrastructure, such as the management of public spaces:

> *“This should be run out across all towns, I've witnessed people stop to talk to each other about the creations, it has brought people together.”* [Participant survey]

For some, pride in their place, and the impacts of their projects on a community level, were down to the idea that projects effectively amplified the voices of their community on a city-wide scale, helping to change and/or challenge existing assumptions.

Project design: decision-making and co-creation

> *'There are many definitions of co-creation. For us, it is where the agency of the community represents at least 50% of the decision making both creatively and in how the project is delivered. We're not expecting realised artworks.'*
> Leeds 2023: My World, My City, My Neighbourhood Artist Brief, as cited in Wray 2022, p.11

The guiding principle included in the Leeds 2023 artist brief was that all MWMCMN projects should allow for at least 50% of the decision-making (both creative decisions and project delivery) to be led by the community. However each individual project took a range of different approaches to fulfilling this brief. Therefore, the degree of co-creation enabled within each project was heavily reliant on the specific contexts in which they took place. For instance, some of the projects worked with existing community groups, while others involved the establishment of a steering group for the projects.

Many artists commented on the vital support that they got from the individuals within the Leeds 2023 Creative Learning team on project delivery. In particular, they felt that the hands-off approach related to project aims and the fact that Leeds 2023 were not didactic about how projects were delivered was important in allowing co-creation to occur.

Many projects started with an open consultation or research process initiated by the lead artist, as a starting point to their co-creative processes. For many, this processual aspect of co-creation was key to providing a much needed 'starting point' or 'entry point' which enabled them to feel free enough to make creative contributions.

Managing the range of different participatory opportunities within the project often required extensive project management and facilitation skills from the lead artists. Many artists described some of the challenges of and barriers to spreading the responsibility for decision-making across communities and participants. For instance, artists described how there were often existing agendas – especially within existing community groups – that needed to be taken into account, which did not always allow for an equitable sharing of responsibility and agency across groups. In addition, there were instances where these power dynamics were out of the hands of artists, as they were embedded in an existing way of working. Other times it was clear that some participants were not interested in playing an active role in decision-making, preferring a more participatory and pre-determined way of engaging.

As such, many lead artists described their role as facilitators, providing opportunities for 'decision-making…. to allow the project to change shape/scale based upon the needs and desires of the group' [Artist report]. This was often borne out of a desire by artists to engage with participants and community members in an ethical and responsible manner, as well as to ensure that any projects were kept on track and that outcomes had a certain coherence.

Nevertheless, most respondents to the participant survey who were asked about how decisions were made by the group felt that everybody had the opportunity to voice their opinions, and that it felt safe to voice their own within their projects. Respondents also felt that it was mostly clear how decisions were made during the sessions.

Key learnings on co-creation

> *'Almost every lead artist reported that they did not have enough time to deliver a co-creative process in the way in which they would have liked to. The majority of artists, particularly those forming new groups or entering into existing groups that they had not worked with before found that the timescales of the project did not enable them to build the trust that was necessary to enable a fully co-creative process to emerge'.*
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> *Wray 2022, p. 7*

One of the prominent learnings that emerged from the Key Learnings report was that a longer-term presence within communities is key to effective co-creative practice. For many projects working with communities, having time to build trust and engagement was not a simple 'nice-to-have', but central to the project's aims and missions. As the report described, for those projects working with marginalised or vulnerable groups who are often excluded from mainstream cultural provision, time to build trust is crucial to getting people to get involved in the first place. It is extremely difficult to encourage people to get involved in something if they are unaware what participation might involve.

Across the MWMCMN programme, participation in projects was often characterised by a 'scaffolding' of engagement throughout the process, providing opportunities to try out different activities and thus building trust with the lead artists and the group's activities more broadly.

Building creative leadership and agency for the projects within communities was another key challenge, especially for a programme like MWMCMN that aims to reach a breadth of communities within one programme. It is clear that a particular set of circumstances were needed in order for co-creation to occur. This included a recognition that ownership had to emerge from the processes of the project. As the lead artists were those that were initially approached for funding for the MWMCMN programme, true co-creation and transferral of agency in decision-making was difficult. A possible solution that was suggested by one lead artist in the programme would be to consider redirecting the funding towards community groups in the first instance which would have enabled those groups willing and able to work in a co-creative way to commission artists and thus work on a more equitable grounding.

Those projects that aimed to provide as much agency and ownership of the processes to participants inevitably required the most time, effort and work from the lead artist. There was consequently a pressure on lead artists to manage many aspects of project delivery. Across the board, artists described the work that went into developing these safe and inclusive spaces, being reflexive and flexible to the needs of participants and the broader communities in terms of the design of the projects. In addition, lead artists had to balance all of these dynamics and responsibilities with their own original aims of the projects and expectations of Leeds 2023 more broadly, often working within their own communities and home towns, to whom they felt a sense of duty and responsibility to be transparent about the constraints, and, in particular, the future of the projects.

Contacts

London Office
2nd Floor, Rich Mix
35-47 Bethnal Green Road
London E1 6LA
T 020 7407 4625

Manchester Office
Green Fish Resource Centre
46–50 Oldham Street
Northern Quarter
Manchester M4 1LE
T 0161 234 2955

hello@theaudienceagency.org
www.theaudienceagency.org