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Create Gloucestershire

Strength in numbers: working together to engage with commissioning

In March 2011, in the face of significant cuts, Gloucestershire County Council stopped all funding to the arts. In response, the county's arts and cultural organisations devised a new way of working. Under the umbrella of **Create Gloucestershire** they are sharing expertise and resources, successfully engaging with commissioners, and diversifying income.

Back in autumn 2010, with cuts imminent, an informal network of organisations applied for a small development grant from the Arts Council to explore the potential of working more closely. 'We decided to create an open model that anybody in the arts sector could join', explains Pippa Jones, Create Gloucestershire's Development Director. 'From that pool of people and organisations we would curate different partnerships to bid for funding.'

'There are many small, diverse arts organisations in Gloucestershire, and there was a sense that without them we would all suffer. Sustaining the whole offer was important,' says Pippa. 'We approached the council with a three-year plan and proposed that they pooled the money that had previously gone to 12 organisations and an arts development officer, took off 30%, and gave us the rest.' The council agreed, and Create Gloucestershire was established to sustain and promote the county's arts and cultural sector. It has since secured £800,000 in funding – a mix of philanthropic and commissioning money, from the NHS and county council – and currently has 54 members.

Starting from the need

Create Gloucestershire members have accessed commissioning money to run arts and cultural projects with outcomes around well-being, health, and resilient communities.

When the council wanted a new service for families experiencing domestic abuse, Create Gloucestershire asked its members for ideas about how the arts might respond. Their many replies formed the basis of a bid, led by Tewkesbury's Roses Theatre, which had experience of commissioning. The bid outlined a project to provide creative activities and a chance to meet people with similar experiences in safe, neutral spaces, delivered by six arts venues across the county. It was successful, and **Your Future** was created.

Key to this success was a focus on the needs of the local area, and how outcomes already achieved by arts organisations could help meet these needs – rather than a focus on what the individual organisations wanted to be funded. Create Gloucestershire runs training for members to understand the context in which commissioners work, looking at the council's needs analyses to identify areas where they may share aims. 'We ask how, as the arts sector, can we better respond to needs where we live? If we do that well, funding will come,' says Pippa.

Constructive conversations

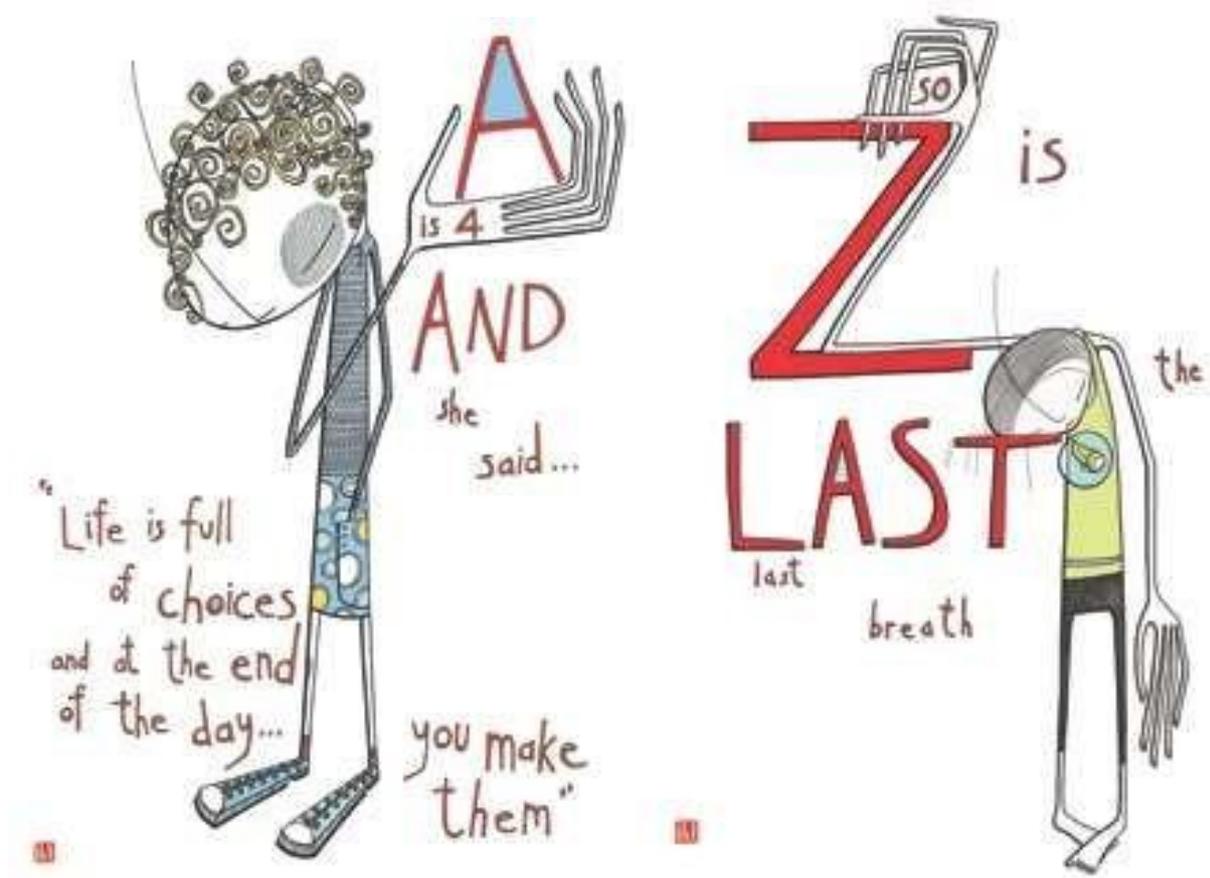
The success of Your Future has given a boost to Create Gloucestershire's members. 'It showed that what the arts sector offers is valuable and can complement the offer from the voluntary sector,' says Pippa. 'It has transformed what people feel the arts can achieve.'

But the question of evaluating the project was not so straightforward. The council had a new outcomes based evaluation framework that was piloted on the project. Delivery partners raised concerns about the layout and content of some of the questions, and that the cultural outputs of the project were not being measured. To address this, the Roses Theatre commissioned consultancy Willis Newson to devise an additional framework that used the [Warwick-Edinburgh mental well-being scale](#) and included focus groups with lead professionals, venues, women and young people, as well as detailed case studies of all of these groups. This approach ensured impact was captured across a range of outcomes.

Create Gloucestershire also commissioned several artists to describe, in different art forms, the impact they saw from the project. Together with the case studies and focus groups, this evidence made a compelling case to commissioners to renew the project’s funding. As Pippa put it, ‘I don’t think they would have listened if we hadn’t got the facts and figures, but in terms of convincing them to roll out year two funding, the stories were most powerful.’

Possibilities, not problems

The particular power of art to solve social problems is evident in another project involving a number of Create Gloucestershire members: [Artlift](#), one of the county’s biggest success stories. It was started when a GP, Dr. Opher, noticed the positive effect of drawing or painting on his own health, and felt it could benefit patients with long-term conditions like depression or chronic pain who did not respond to other treatment.



As part of the evaluation of *Your Future*, artists have been commissioned to describe the impact they see in different art forms—including this illustrated alphabet, which incorporates quotes from project participants.

‘Instead of drugs, people were prescribed ten weeks of arts activity,’ says Pippa. ‘Dr Opher saw a significant reduction in referrals, and calculated cost savings. This [evidence](#) was sufficiently robust for the NHS to roll it out county-wide, and it is now commissioned as an ongoing arts on prescription service.’ In a 2012 [cost-benefit analysis](#), Dr. Opher shows a 27% reduction in healthcare spend for Artlift participants in the year after the project, resulting in a saving to the NHS of £576 per patient. A separate [evaluation by the University of Gloucester](#) looks at the impact on patients, finding a significant improvement in well-being after the ten weeks.

The project’s basis in art, rather than medicine, is what makes it work: ‘it focuses on patients as creative people with possibilities, rather than problems,’ says Pippa. ‘At the end of the ten weeks many groups continue running their own group, which is a great indicator of how the project empowers participants.’ Artlift programmes often take place in arts venues, which provide a neutral, non-medicalised environment, free of stigma. They also open up a way into mainstream cultural activities – joining theatre groups, attending shows or volunteering.

Artlift, like many of the projects Create Gloucestershire engages in, is as much about the transformative process of creating as the artistic work produced, so measuring the quality of this process is as important as judging the artistic quality of the end result. Pippa recognises that assessment of quality is complex: ‘we try to understand what audiences and participants say is quality, and how that mirrors what artists and arts organisations think is quality. But we know that the commissions we get will only continue if the quality of both the process and the end result are absolutely exceptional.’ Create Gloucestershire is mindful of the skills required to work in the different contexts these commissions involve, and trains and mentors members to increase the pool of artists able to do so. ‘We need enough people who are really good artists but also skilled to work with people in potentially difficult situations.’

Vibrant and creative communities

One benefit of Create Gloucestershire’s collaborative approach is that members learn from the success of their peers. Tewkesbury’s youth theatre accessed money from a local housing association, which funds 50% of the cost of the group for anybody living on its estate. It noticed that on nights the youth theatre took place there were consistently fewer callouts to its estate security – a reduction in antisocial behaviour – and was willing to fund the group to save on security costs.

Housing is a priority need in Gloucestershire, and this small example offered a way in for others to work with housing providers, including the council. One project under discussion centres on a large development of new homes in Cirencester. In the past, there have been problems with new estates that lack the infrastructure to build a thriving community. ‘One of our members, New Brewery Arts, is talking with the council right at the start of the project to try to embed a cultural infrastructure from day one,’ says Pippa. ‘We thought the planners would laugh at our proposal, but it’s been the opposite: they understand that investing in arts and culture in the area will develop a vibrant and creative community, helping to sell houses and reducing the ongoing costs of antisocial behaviour.’ In this case, building on the evidence of one member’s success has opened doors for bigger projects.

A different lens

These public-private collaborations, such as the Cirencester housing development, offer another source of potential funding that Create Gloucestershire is exploring. In the Forest of Dean, where youth unemployment is high, **Artspace Cinderford** works with young people to develop and run their own creative projects. As well as nurturing artistic talent, young people hone a host of transferable skills, from event management to fundraising. 'By reframing that work we can access completely different strands of funding, via the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP),' explains Pippa. 'Cinderford Artspace continues to do what it has always done, but we put a different lens on it, emphasising outcomes around employability and entrepreneurship.' Cinderford can also capitalise on its ability to get young people through the door and engaged in its projects, where traditional employability programmes can struggle. Again, exploring shared outcomes is key: 'we talk about the value that's being created here, and how that fits with LEP targets'.

Going further together

With changes to commissioning affecting arts and cultural organisations across the country, does Create Gloucestershire's collaborative model offer a potential solution? Pippa sees several advantages: 'it makes it easier for commissioners to navigate a diverse sector – they might struggle to have enough time to get a handle on the range of organisations and art forms on their own. To set up Your Future the domestic violence commissioner would have needed to spend time talking to a lot of small organisations, but we took away that work. Our diverse membership gives us credibility with commissioners: they see us as representing arts in Gloucestershire. It also means we can present the bigger picture, with all the pieces of the jigsaw fitting together.'

Finally, it comes back to that question of confidence. Many Create Gloucestershire members are small, local organisations, and may feel unable to provide county-wide services alone. 'We often talk about how much further birds fly when they're in formation,' reflects Pippa. 'You can go further together.'

**For more information and resources on Cultural Commissioning visit <http://www.ncvo.org/CCProg>
Case study researched and written by Matilda Macduff**