

heartofglass

CPP Evaluation Report
Round 4.3, April 2024 – March 2025

May 2025
Alastair Roy and Owen Hutchings

Table of Contents

Section 1 - Introduction.....	4
Report Structure	4
Creative People and Places.....	4
Context	5
Programme Aims	5
Research	6
Section 2 – Project Case Studies	7
2.1 Buzz Hub - Incubator Projects	7
Introduction	7
Context	8
Process and Description – The Three Projects	9
Outputs and Outcomes.....	14
Learning and Legacy	15
2.2 Strong Women: Knowsley	17
Introduction	19
Context	19
Process and Description	20
Outputs and outcomes	20
Learning and Legacy	21
2.3 Home	23
Introduction	23
Context	23
Process and Description	23
Outputs and Outcomes.....	25
Learning and Legacy	26
2.4 The Posh Club	26
Introduction	27
Context	27
Process and Description	28
Outputs and Outcomes.....	29
Learning and Legacy	29
2.5 How to Look After a Grieving Elephant (And Other Social Animals)	29
Introduction	30
Context	31
Process and Description	31
Outputs and Outcomes.....	31
Learning and Legacy	32
4. Discussion	32
4.1 Are more people from places of least engagement experiencing and inspired by creativity and culture and what are the most effective ways to achieve this?.....	33
4.2 What approaches enable us to deliver on our aspiration for excellence, both in the process of community engagement and the creative and cultural experiences on offer?	34

Models of community involvement.....	34
The Continuing Value of Partnerships.....	35
4.3 What else are we learning that facilitates better public engagement in creativity and culture?	36
Responding the important social issues generated in conversation with communities.....	36
The producer role	37
5. Conclusions.....	38
5.1 Are more people from places of least engagement experiencing and inspired by creativity and culture and what are the most effective ways to achieve this?.....	38
5.2 What approaches enable us to deliver on our aspiration for excellence, both in the process of community engagement and the creative and cultural experiences on offer?	39
5.3 What else are we learning that facilitates better public engagement in creativity and culture?	39

Section 1 - Introduction

This report documents the qualitative evaluation of the third year (April 2024 – March 2025) of of Round 4 programme of funding Heart of Glass's Creative People and Places (CPP).

It outlines progress against the 2022-25 Business Plan and considers lessons learned. In this report we draw together the research findings to track the programme's impact against the three core CPP research questions, which are:

1. Are more people from places of least engagement experiencing and inspired by creativity and culture and what are the most effective ways to achieve this?
2. What approaches enable us to deliver on our aspiration for excellence, both in the process of community engagement and the creative and cultural experiences on offer?
3. What else are we learning that facilitates better public engagement in creativity and culture?

The focus of this report is the process of engaging people in creative activities and what has been learnt from this process about what is most effective and least effective.

Report Structure

Section 1: Introduction, provides information about the context and the aims of the third year of the programme.

Section 2: Provides a detailed account of two projects undertaken this year, the Buzz Hub residencies and How to Look After a Grieving Elephant.

Section 3: Provides pen portraits of four projects undertaken this year, The Posh Club, Strong Women, Instinct Labs and Nature Neighbours

Section 4: Provides a brief discussion, which considers the projects and overall programme against its 'Communities Taking the Lead', as well as the aims, objectives and research questions set out by CPP.

Section 4: A short conclusion summarises the evaluation findings, identifying key achievements.

Creative People and Places

CPP is a national action learning programme that takes place in areas identified as having less involvement in traditional arts and cultural activities than elsewhere in England. Heart of Glass' vision for this programme is underpinned by a commitment to accessible co-creation and enabling communities to take the lead in the projects they participate in.

Heart of Glass has completed ten years of cultural production and collaboration through the first three phases of CPP investment (2014-2022), documented in the final reports for those phases (Roy et al. 2017; 2020). In Phase 2 we evidenced how Heart of Glass built on previous collaborations to deepen levels of artistic engagement, inviting new communities and individuals to take part; and contributed to the development of a sustainable arts ecology in the area. By 2020 Heart of Glass and its partners had established St Helens as a place for innovative socially engaged artistic practice, with an internationally recognized reputation. In Phase 3, heavily restricted by Covid-19, Heart of Glass broke new ground in co-creating permanent street art. The Heart of Glass programme has harnessed the relationships and learning of these phases in the development of the fourth phase of CPP programming (2022-2026), which includes also working in Knowsley and developing a more environmentally conscious programme.

Context

Arts organisations are working within a context where more is expected of them, as public funding for community-based organisations has declined or been withdrawn. Also, the political culture and civic engagement of working-class communities in areas like St Helens and Knowsley has been weakened by long-term unemployment and the closure of public meeting places and work-based sites for culture and socialising. The more recent cost of living crisis has exacerbated multiple forms of relative deprivation which negatively impact the individual resources available for artistic and cultural experiences whilst increasing the need for them. There are also a wider range of more fragmented communities of interest, each with their own distinctive interests and needs for cultural citizenship. Making decisions about where to invest finite resources is therefore a great challenge. Many areas of St Helens and Knowsley experience multiple forms of deprivation and these are associated with low levels of cultural engagement. Both areas are predominantly White British (over 90%) and 23.6% of Knowsley's population is d/Deaf or disabled (22% in St Helens), with one in five people aged between 50-64.

Programme Aims

Heart of Glass' aims and objectives for the third year of the current four-year programme are as follows:

Engaging communities to take the lead in shaping a cultural offer in their local area, (E.g. *Strong Women* undertaken with residents across Knowsley).

Presenting work in non-traditional spaces in community contexts where the least engaged audiences attend, (*Home* by Cherie Grist Renshaw with residents from Stockbridge).

Provide a programme which removes barriers to accessing projects and creates opportunities at varying levels of engagement (all projects).

Actively growing opportunities for minority and marginalised people (E.g. *Strong Women*, *Buzz Hub Residencies*).

Working in partnership with cross-sector organisations to engage with people who are the least engaged in the arts (all projects).

Research

The purpose of the research is to explore the different elements of the Heart of Glass CPP programme and what it provides to the people of Knowsley and St Helens. It uses qualitative methods, such as participant observation, unstructured interviewing, and remote, semi-structured interviewing; all designed to capture the distinctive character of processes and activities, and their effects and outcomes. Research of this form is necessarily selective rather than comprehensive. Decisions on what to research and when with these resource intensive methods were reached through discussion between the Chief Executive, Head of CPP Programme and the Lead Evaluator. In total Heart of Glass collaborated with 9,241 and presented to an audience of 320, 714.

Key Programme 24-25 (projects not included within the case studies / pen portraits:

Project	Artist	Producer	Location	Participants	Audience
Nature Neighbours	Juneau Projects	Caroline Smith (freelance)	Halewood, Knowsley	189	3200
Lost Treasures of Kirkby	Shonagh Short	Caroline Smith (freelance)	Kirkby, Knowsley	57	n/a
Share and Repair	Shonagh Short	Caroline Smith (freelance)	Stockbridge, Knowsley	56	110
Singing Parents	Leonie Higgins	Suzanne Dempsey (freelance)	Parr, Stockton, St Helens	55	n/a
Instinct Lab	Unfinished Business	Anna Kronenburg	Huyton, Knowsley	407	500
Huyton Station	Andy Small	Nat Hughes	Huyton, Knowsley	25	n/a

Section 2 – Project Case Studies

In this section we document four projects and a programme comprising multiple projects. In each case we provide a description of the engagement process, responses to this process and the artworks and/or experience. We also discuss what has been learnt from the projects and their outcomes in terms of the CPP evaluation questions.

2.1 Buzz Hub - Incubator Projects

Project dates	February - March 2025 (1 week of R & D, 4 weeks of workshops, 1 week sharing)
Artist	Laura-Kate Pontifract, Ellie Harding and Rhonda Davies
Participants	Buzz Hub
Delivery Partner	Buzz Hub
Project Location	Buzz Hub Units 10 and Buzz Hub Allotment - St Helens
Producers	Suzanne Dempsey (freelance) and Owen Hutchings (freelance)
Workshops	140 Participation/Workshop attendances (across the 3 residencies, 15 workshops, 3 research and development visits and 3 sharing events).
Audiences	113 Sharing/exhibition event audiences (across the 3 residencies).

Introduction

Buzz Hub is part of St Helens' Coalition of Disabled People, offering tailored opportunities to individuals with learning disabilities. Rooted in the spirit of questions like "Why can't I do...?" and "I'd like to...", it provides activities that build confidence, connection, and creativity across sport, gardening, and a wide array of visual and performing arts.

Since 2018, Buzz Hub has partnered with Heart of Glass on projects to widen access to meaningful artistic experiences. The service is driven by a belief that Buzz Hub belongs to its participants, with activities designed and facilitated by artist-practitioners who understand the value of creativity as a tool for self-expression and social change. The organisation operates across multiple sites in St Helens, with an emphasis on accessibility, collaboration, and participant-led development.

Context

In early 2025 Heart of Glass commissioned three artists to collaborate with Buzz Hub. After a period of research at Buzz Hub, each artist was invited to respond to a provocation exploring how they might co-create new artistic work with Buzz Hub participants. The outcome was three distinct projects shaped by the interests, needs, and voices of members.

These commissions built on the foundations of earlier 'Prototype' commissions. These earlier projects, initiated between 2014-2017, were small commissions that offered local artists the opportunity to bid for £50-£2000 to realise a Research and Development initiative or full Prototype Project. A panel decision process was in place to determine which proposals were successful. At the time, the objective was to contribute to the programmatic aim of supporting an infrastructure of emerging artists to acquire skills and confidence in socially engaged arts practice. Reflections on those projects prompted Heart of Glass to reconsider the producer role and its importance in this often challenging new field of practice. The earlier projects produced mixed results, which were incorporated into Heart of Glass' action learning cycle. The Buzz Hub Incubator Projects have allowed Heart of Glass to reconsider whether this type of practice can be meaningful and appropriate for artists, participants, as well as contributing the work of community partners.

To identify suitable artists, Heart of Glass conducted a scoping process in partnership with other local socially-engaged arts organisations (The Bluecoat, Metal, FACT and Buzz Hub themselves). These partners were asked to recommend artists with experience in socially engaged practice, particularly with people with learning disabilities. From this, a longlist of six artists was developed by the team at Heart of Glass.

Each long-listed artist was paid £125 to produce a short, accessible PDF introducing themselves, outlining their artistic practice, and proposing ideas for potential collaboration with Buzz Hub participants. These documents were then shared with Buzz Hub's staff, who supported participants in reviewing the proposals. With guidance, the participants selected the three artists who were ultimately commissioned.

Process and Description – The Three Projects

Ellie Hoskins:

Ellie is a fine artist and writer recommended by The Bluecoat for this commission due to her experience mentoring on their Blue Room project which supported learning disabled artists¹.

She collaborated with Buzz Hub's Monday art group to co-create a series of masks and cloaks inspired by previous sculptural works made by participants in their regular

¹ <https://www.thebluecoat.org.uk/projects/blue-room>

weekly sessions. As the group had no prior experience with wearable art, Ellie introduced new materials and techniques within the sessions.

For the sharing event, wearable art was displayed on mannequins alongside photographs in the group's familiar workshop space. However, participants largely chose not to engage with the static exhibition, showing greater interest in the interactive workshop activities. Despite this, the presence of 12 family members and Buzz Hub staff highlighted the event's value as a moment of connection and celebration.



Rhonda Davies:

Rhonda, a screen-printer with a background in mental health engagement, collaborated with Buzz Hub's Wednesday allotment group on a creative project centred around food and cooking. These are interests that the group had identified as priorities for developing projects around. Although the group typically focused on gardening and had never made art together before, they embraced the opportunity to create a series of illustrated recipe cards and related artworks. The recipes were based on vegetables grown at the allotment and will be included in the Buzz Hub vegetable boxes sold during the summer.

The group, which included deaf and non-verbal participants, explored accessible, creative ways to express themselves through both visual art and cooking. On the project's sharing day, they prepared one of the featured recipes, Carrot and Coriander soup. Half the group took responsibility for preparing the food, while the other half curated the space, gaining valuable experience in event organisation. Families attended the event and praised the quality of the outcomes. Participants took great pride in both their artistic contributions and the warm, welcoming atmosphere they had helped create.



Laura-Kate Draws:

The only artist (invited by Buzz Hub) to apply had previous collaborations with Buzz Hub, Laura-Kate, worked with the Thursday art group on *What Makes Me Me*. Each participant created an abstract sculptural vessel representing their inner self.

The exhibition was professionally curated by Laura-Kate, with sculptures displayed on plinths and accompanied by abstract interpretations. This elevated presentation gave participants a sense of occasion and pride.

Although some participants were nervous, the atmosphere encouraged reflection and helped them view their work differently, instilling a deep sense of achievement.



Pen Portrait: Dan Two Moods

This text written by Laura Kate and Dan accompanied his sculpture at the exhibition.

“This sculpture captures the duality of human emotion, reflecting the artist’s personal journey through light and dark. The stark contrast between red

and monochrome symbolises shifting states of mind—red embodying warmth, positivity, and brighter days, while black and grey evoke introspection, melancholy, and the ebb of darker moods. Flecks of light punctuate the piece, signifying hope and resilience even in shadowed moments. Through this work, the artist invites viewers to empathise with the complexities of emotional experience, acknowledging that everyone encounters both radiant and challenging days. The creative process proved cathartic, leaving the artist feeling content and at ease.”



When asked to describe himself, one of the first things Dan says is that he is “not at all artistic.” However, his engagement throughout the project tells a different story. Attending Buzz Hub provides structure and support for Dan, he explains that what he values most is simply getting out and about. Despite doubting his ability to draw, Dan found the process of creating artwork within this project deeply meaningful. He described it as similar to a boxer channelling anger into a punchbag: an outlet for emotion. Through the abstract sculptural process facilitated by Laura-Kate, he was able to externalise his darker moods in a way that felt cathartic and authentic. Dan particularly appreciated that he wasn’t asked to replicate something exactly. The freedom to create something abstract allowed him to express emotions that are otherwise difficult to articulate. He noted that working with Laura-Kate was a highlight of the project, citing her kindness and supportiveness as important factors in helping him open up and fully engage. The resulting artwork resonated with Dan’s family, who attended the exhibition; their reaction to his work made him feel proud—especially as this is what he set out to do. The message of his piece, which conveyed that everyone

has both dark and bright days, was clearly understood by viewers. For Dan, who often struggles to express himself verbally, the tactile nature of sculpting offered an accessible and empowering alternative. The process helped him focus, temporarily silence negative thoughts, and find a meaningful outlet for self-expression.

Pen Portrait: Rachel Love Hammer



“Determined to push boundaries, the artist set out to create the tallest sculpture in the collection. Initially inspired by the raw power of a volcano, the piece evolved over time into a unique, commanding presence. Gold was chosen for its luminous impact, ensuring the sculpture would stand apart, while red lingers like smouldering molten lava, evoking the earth's untamed energy. Purple tones pay homage to the industrial heritage of the artist's adopted hometown of St Helens, echoing the silhouettes of long-gone chimneys. Heart motifs embody a generous and vibrant personality. The artist hopes that viewers will feel uplifted and embraced by the sculpture's energy, much as they did during its creation.”

Although Rachel has attended BH for several years, this project marked the first time she had the opportunity to exhibit her work publicly. This was a significant moment for her, as her mother—who regularly attends her sister's performances—had never before seen Rachel's own creative output. The exhibition provided a powerful opportunity for Rachel to express her identity and be recognised in a new light. Determined to challenge herself during the making process, Rachel set out to create the largest piece in the assemblage. Initially planning to sculpt a volcano, she embraced the abstract and fluid nature of the project, crafting a piece of work devised from her own imagination, she wanted to do something out of her own head that represented love hearts, flowers and her favourite colour of gold which ultimately led her to produce a form more reminiscent of a hammer. Like Dan's work, Rachel's piece

became a reflection of her emotional world—expressing love, friendship, and care for others.

Rachel took great pride in seeing her work displayed alongside that of her peers and was enthusiastic about the exhibition as a whole. She was especially pleased by her mother's positive reaction and appreciated the opportunity to receive feedback on her work.

Looking ahead, Rachel expressed a desire for a longer project timeline and for the exhibition to be displayed for an extended period. Despite finding it difficult to communicate and speak to people, notably, she also suggested that, with appropriate training, she and other participants could act as invigilators in future exhibitions—an idea that would not only deepen engagement but also support the development of new skills and responsibilities among participants.

Pen Portrait: Scott – Looks Can Be Deceiving

“This work challenges perception, urging the viewer to look beyond surface impressions. Inspired by a fascination with the eerie and fantastical, the sculpture draws on the imagery of a snake—an emblem of deception and transformation. Though intended to convey something sinister, the artist deliberately chose shades of green, diverging from a typically darker palette to create a subtler sense of unease. This exploration of colour marks a significant departure in their artistic journey. The artist’s favourite element of the piece is the eyes, meticulously crafted to imbue the sculpture with an intense and hypnotic gaze. The artist hopes viewers will engage with the form and recognise that appearances can be misleading.”



A fan of rugby, football, and horror, Scott is a highly creative individual with a strong interest in artwork that explores the darker side of popular culture. He attends BH to socialise and enjoys the sense of fun and camaraderie among participants. Scott finds the hands-on nature of making art particularly rewarding, explaining that it helps him focus and feel “in the zone,” keeping his mind busy and engaged.

Scott participated in both Ellie's and Laura-Kate's workshops. With Ellie, he appreciated the opportunity to collaboratively create dark, imaginative sculptures in a group setting. In Laura-Kate's sessions, he welcomed the challenge of making work that moved away from his usual themes, encouraging him to develop a different artistic approach.

Although Scott has attended BH for some time, this was his first experience exhibiting his work. He expressed pride in being able to share the final piece with his sister and staff members. He especially valued the exhibition's written interpretation of his piece—a sculpture of a snake—which highlighted the tension between the creature's symbolic evil and its calm, deceptive exterior, capturing exactly what he had hoped to convey.

Inspired by this experience, Scott is eager to take part in future exhibitions. He hopes more people will have the chance to see and appreciate his work, and that future opportunities will replicate the excitement and pride he felt in this initial public display.

Outputs and Outcomes

Buzz Hub and Heart of Glass are committed to continuing their partnership. In the medium term, this includes exploring an Arts Council England application to support a programme of new work at Buzz Hub. This would build toward extended exhibitions or installation-based sharings.

In the longer term, the vision is for Buzz Hub is to lead on larger-scale, two- to three-year programmes that strengthen the quality and delivery of socially engaged practice. This would enable the group to become a sustainable cultural asset within the borough, capable of attracting external investment and producing work with long-term community and artistic value.

Buzz Hub's recent projects based at St Helens Central Train Station presents a unique opportunity for a public-facing installation. This site could host long-term, community-made work—challenging cultural marginalisation and making Buzz Hub's borough's creative output more visible to broader publics. Embedding an artist over time would also allow for deeper, sustained engagement, supporting participants to move from co-makers to co-creators and, potentially, future commissioners.

Learning and Legacy

Buzz Hub views on learning and legacy

At the heart of Buzz Hub's delivery are the dedicated staff who work closely with participants. Two such practitioners, Sam and Emma, were actively involved in these projects—Sam collaborating with Laura-Kate and Emma working with both Laura-Kate and Ellie. Sam brings a background in Graphic Design, while Emma is a multi-disciplinary artist. Emma observed that both artists took time to build relationships with the participants, allowing their projects to evolve organically without imposing rigid artistic agendas. This sensitive and responsive approach was praised by both staff

members. Sam described Laura-Kate as “a breath of fresh air,” noting that the day-to-day delivery of sessions can become repetitive due to the consistency of group dynamics. Laura-Kate’s presence reinvigorated the sessions with new energy and perspective.

However, both practitioners acknowledged a challenge: participant’s fixations on popular culture—TV shows, music, and films—can limit creative growth. Laura-Kate was able to address this by channelling those interests into abstract forms, rather than simply replicating existing media, helping participants expand their artistic capabilities.

Both artists’ exhibitions were praised. Ellie’s use of large-scale masks displayed on mannequins was seen as an innovative presentation, while Laura-Kate’s careful curation—displaying vessels on plinths with well-written exhibition statements — allowed for accessibility, especially for wheelchair users, and highlighted the individuality of each participant’s work.

Looking ahead, Sam and Emma suggested that longer projects with half-day sessions may better support participant engagement. They also recommended embedding artists within the group over extended periods, with a focus on continuing professional development (CPD) for staff. This would enable staff to adopt new methods and sustain creative growth beyond the lifespan of individual projects. Finally, both practitioners highlighted the transformation in Dan, and are now keen to see new opportunities for BH participants’ to create long-term, showcase-driven opportunities that reflect and celebrate the participants’ artistic skills.

David Webster, the Partnerships and Opportunities Manager at Buzz Hub, also referenced the experience of Dan, observed that strong relationships formed between the artists and participants, describing the dynamic as a reciprocal and symbiotic exchange. This was evident in the reluctance of both artists and participants to conclude their time together, demonstrating the depth of their connection. David was also keen to stress that the rapport that the producers that worked with the artists built up with the staff and participants in the project was excellent and should be recognised as a reason for the project(s) success.

Looking ahead, David suggested that the future activity could be enhanced through longer creative processes with larger-scale outcomes and events, allowing for even more ambitious artistic work and future work with Heart of Glass could act as a conducive learning process to develop artistic ambitions for Buzz Hub. Additionally, he expressed interest in exploring more dynamic professional development opportunities for the Buzz Hub staff team. Rather than relying on the traditional model of artists temporarily “parachuting in” to deliver projects, he advocated for a more sustainable approach in which staff—who maintain ongoing contact with participants—are upskilled and supported in their continued development.

Artist's Views on Learning and Legacy

All three artists reported that participants were meaningfully challenged and encouraged to step outside of their comfort zones. This was particularly evident in the groups led by Laura-Kate and Ellie, where participants were supported to think conceptually and abstractly about their creative processes. This theme of personal and artistic development through stylistic experimentation was echoed by all participants interviewed. In terms of future development, the artists recommended more focused work with individuals or smaller groups, which they felt would lead to deeper creative engagement. Ellie referenced her experience with The Bluecoat's Blue Room project as an effective model, where sustained individualised work had led to significant artistic progression. This aligns with feedback from Buzz Hub staff members Emma and Sam.

The artists also suggested involving regular Buz Hub staff at the planning stage of future projects. These staff members have in-depth knowledge of participants' needs, preferences, and energy levels—such as who may become tired after lunch—and can help shape more responsive and effective project structures. Involving them would not only foster a more cohesive approach but also generate ideas rooted in the practical realities of the group. There was clear acknowledgement of the dedication and expertise of the regular staff, who were praised for their ability to understand and respond to the nuanced needs of participants.

Although not a major barrier, artists noted that inconsistencies in group attendance—where different participants joined on different days—sometimes made planning challenging and impacted the continuity of the work. All three artists suggested that half-day workshops, rather than full days, might better maintain participant focus and engagement. Despite these logistical issues, the artists highlighted numerous positive moments. For instance, one participant in Ellie's group, initially resistant to moving from 2D to 3D work, became deeply engaged by the end of the project and expressed a strong connection to the artist. Similarly, in Laura-Kate's group, the emotional response at the final exhibition—where some participants were moved to tears—underscored the depth of the relationships formed and the impact of the project. Finally, the artists proposed that consideration to workshops delivered outside of the participants' usual environments might enhance focus and group cohesion, offering a fresh context in which to explore new ideas.

Co-Commissioning and Inclusive Practice

Co-commissioning art with participants, third sector organisations, and arts partners requires a careful balance. While participants and support organisations may not be specialists in arts delivery, they hold crucial knowledge about the needs, preferences, and lived experiences of those involved. Heart of Glass recognised this by adopting a community-as-commissioner approach, inviting peer arts organisations to nominate artists they believed should be commissioned. Five artists were paid for their time to participate in a shortlisting process, before BH staff and participants made the final

selection. This method empowered community voices while supporting the sector fairly, avoiding the typical demands of an open call, which often attracts upwards of 60 submissions. It created a collaborative commissioning framework that values sector expertise and local knowledge equally. Heart of Glass staff reflected that this was a productive, equitable way to work across the sector—encouraging sustainable partnerships and increasing capacity for community-led cultural decision-making

Shared Themes and Project Impact

Across the viewpoints gathered throughout the project, several common themes emerged, highlighting the transformative and relevant nature of these inclusive, participant-led creative practice. Although each artist's approach and each participant's expression were distinctive, shared outcomes included increased emotional articulation, pride in achievement, and the value of non-verbal communication as a bridge across confidence, language, and social barriers. These outcomes demonstrate the importance of relevance and excellence in both the engagement process and the cultural experiences offered.

The quality of relationships was consistently identified as a success factor. Strong connections between artists, participants, producers, and support staff created a foundation of trust and responsiveness. Skilled, consistent staff who understood group dynamics and individual needs played a key role in enabling meaningful participation. Their openness to learning alongside artists fostered an action research mindset, where everyone involved—staff, participants, and artists—contributed to an evolving, reflective practice.

Sharing events provided powerful moments of recognition and celebration. These were not only opportunities to present creative outcomes but also meaningful spaces for connection, visibility, and pride. Family members, participants, and staff alike highlighted the importance of this public acknowledgement in building confidence and affirming the value of the work—broadening the cultural landscape and creating new entry points for audiences in St Helens.

2.2 Strong Women: Knowsley

A long duration heritage project focussed on wellbeing and celebrating the untold stories of local working class women.

Project dates	November 2023 to July 2024
Participants	Mothers of Northwood Primary School ('Northwood Mums') (13), U3A Kirkby, parents and children of St. Marie's Catholic Primary School (140), Centre 63 (14), The Eco Therapy Garden CIC, Tower Hill Community Centre; Halewood Youth in Community Centre

	(Boyszee), Huyton residents, Kirkby C of E Primary School, Kirkby Christian Fellowship, Kirkby Library (11), Make Huyton Village, Northwood Together (9), and Stockbridge Village Library.
Artists	Carrie Reichardt and Claire Eccleston
Delivery Partner	St. Marie's Primary School, Knowsley Archives, Knowsley Council.
Funder	National Lottery Heritage Fund.
Project Location	Tower Hill Community Centre; Kirkby & Stockbridge Libraries; The Maples, Kirkby; St Marie's CofE Primary School; Tower Hill Community Centre. Permanent artwork locations: The Coffee House, Units 10, 11, Centre Retail Park, Kirkby, Liverpool L32 8US, and St. Marie's Catholic Primary School, Kirkby.
Producers	Anna Kronenburg, Nat Hughes (podcasts).
Workshops	502- creative workshop participants- this includes July fabrication numbers.
Audiences	180 visits to install in town centre 65 launch attendees town centre 130 launch attendees at school 50,859 artwork visits since launch (11% total footfall)

The map below is based on 107 unique postcodes from 370 gathered from participants during the project, showing the geographical spread of engagement and its concentrations.

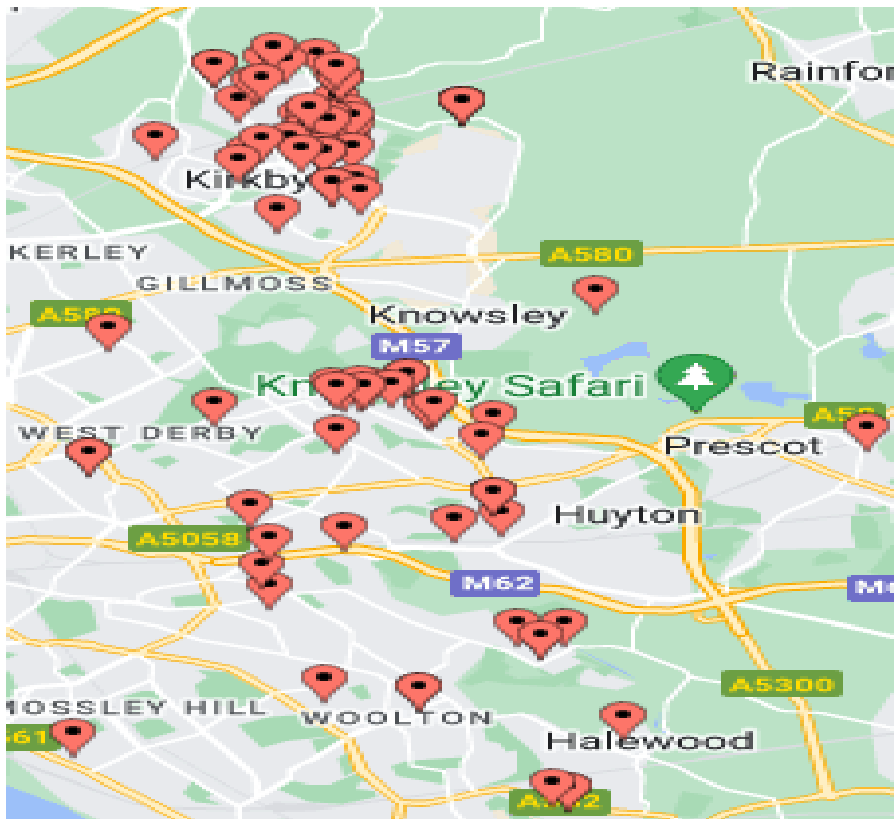


Figure 1: Engagement map excluding outliers

Introduction

This is a new iteration of the project that ran in Parr from January to July 2023. Learning and insight gained from working in St Helens informed the aspirations and approaches used in Knowsley. This is the first time Heart of Glass have worked in some areas of Knowsley - Kirby and Northwood. The project also engaged residents living in other areas of Knowsley where recent Heart of Glass projects have taken place such as Stockbridge.

Context

There are more public statues of men named John than there are of women, in the UK. Strong Women aims to capture and highlight the untold stories of women in St Helens and Knowsley and celebrate their contributions to the boroughs through two new murals. The project also features a programme of free events, podcasts and schools resources exploring women and LGBTQIA+ artists' role within the history of street art. This project is part of a series of public artworks platforming the work of women and LGBTQIA+ artists.

Process and Description

Working with a large number of different groups, engagement took a number of different forms. The work is centred around the town of Kirkby and the area of Northwood. The majority of participants were involved in March and April by making ceramic hearts with personalised messages to female loved ones - relatives,

colleagues, friends. An oral history element engaged interested individuals in conducting the local history research required to produce a place-specific mural, informing the content of the final artwork; and producing new recordings for the local archive. This involved participants in the research and development stage of the project. Public drop-in workshops were also held across the borough where previous projects have initiated an engagement with people in other areas (Halewood, Prescott, and Huyton).

The artists met with partners and potential participant groups over five days in November and December 2023, learning a lot about Knowsley and Kirkby in the process. This longer lead in time allowed for building rapport and trust. Liv Housing provided information of local groups for the artists and Heart of Glass producer to meet. The Heart of Glass producer then made return visits to the groups in spaces where the workshops could take place. This gave the project a head start, giving greater oversight over planning and organising sessions to work with the artists.

The Northwood Mums are the core group that worked with the artists on the design and creation of the mural over a longer period of time and a greater number of sessions (firing, glazing and mosaicing, and installing). Other participants included residents of The Maples in Kirkby, which provided a venue for other workshops; Halewood Youth Centre, and children and parents of St. Marie's Catholic Primary School. Claire Eddleston independently ran ceramic heart-making workshops at the school, demonstrating how she has developed as an artist since her involvement in the first Strong Women project in Parr as a mentee.

They struggled with the first one (ceramic heart) but once they'd made the first one they had all these ideas to make extra hearts...they've all fitted in there is no excess, it's all been brought together. Every single heart made at the school has gone into the two murals at the school.

Claire Eccleston, co-artist

Outputs and outcomes

Local Oral historians Grieg Campbell (mentor) and Sam Best (mentee) trained eleven participants over 2.5 days in March to April 2024 (five sessions) to collect stories from mainly working class women whose stories are relatively unheard of. They shared examples of working class based projects and provided guidance on interviewing techniques. They also provided mentoring and feedback sessions. Sam Best (who worked on the 2023-24 Halewood project) developed her capacity in this mentee role, supporting the oral histories workshops and interviewing some residents). Greg's approach was motivated by his working class background, as an opportunity to learn about working class experience and provide a platform for marginalised working class voices. Participants were introduced to Knowsley Archives through a guided research session with archive staff, and then identified someone to interview about their chosen

theme. This complemented the mural co-created by other residents. The oral history recordings have been added to the Knowsley archive.

The Northwood Mums worked with Carrie and Claire on a regular basis during their usual weekly meetings from February to July 2024. This is a pre-established group of mothers of children attending Northwood Primary School. They are facilitated by a social prescribing lead employed by Knowsley Council. They saw the value in the project and supported Heart of Glass' engagement with the group. The group members were keen to take part so were invited to be a part of the core participant group. People organically join the group through their existing school based relationship.

When the researcher visited the workshops in June and July 2024 they experienced a convivial and lively group clearly enjoying spending time with one another whilst cutting tiles to make mosaics for the final artwork. It was clear that everyone knew what they were doing, with participants helping each other to cut and glue pieces of ceramic tile to sections of the final mural. The artist facilitated by providing the materials and the focus on the work, working alongside the participants and engaging in conversations. A productive and positive atmosphere included conversations about everyday challenges and family events, music and occasional, spontaneous singing and discussion of musical preferences. The open door format of the workshop meant that residents of the building could come in and observe the work taking place.

For one participant taking part was really important to them because the conviviality supported them in managing serious challenges in daily life. The artwork provided a focus for assertively and affectionately giving expression to their resilience in the face of numerous forms of adversity. In this context, one participant felt it was important that "women know not to take abuse".

Prior to June 2024 this and other groups had made a total of 550 ceramic hearts with personalised messages to be included in the final mosaic mural. This is more than needed for the main mosaic mural so the project team decided to approach Northwood Primary School to see if they would be interested in having a mural on the school premises. When the school did not respond St Marie's Catholic Primary School was approached so that an additional mural could be created within the project timeframe.

Learning and Legacy

The facilitator of the core group said,

These women have sat and made hearts together out of clay but more importantly they have been able to support and encourage each other to be bold, creative and express themselves. This programme has shown the women that they are valued and the things that they do every day are incredible.

Jayne Hoarty, Social Prescribing Team Leader, CMCA. Social Action Lead Knowsley

The researcher spoke to two members of staff at St. Marie's Catholic Primary School at the launch of the murals located at the school.

I made a few myself and it was really enjoyable, the kids loved it, very hands on, nice for them to do. It helps them focus because they are doing something different, getting carried away with the patterns. Claire was really good, she was very helpful and informative.

Teaching Assistant, Year Five

The mural has lots of Strong Women's names on it, previous members of staff we've lost are on there as well, so there's a strong link.

Teacher, Year Four

Empowering, togetherness, colourful... It's brought the community together, all ages.

Audience member at unveiling

It has been highly beneficial to run the same project a second time as it has provided an opportunity to develop and improve the project design and therefore effectively engage more people and to a greater depth of experience.

There was increased subjective wellbeing through sharing experiences and being listened to. The stories shared in the art process positively impacted participants at an individual level. Participation has also produced subjective wellbeing through self-actualisation or pride generated by creating a heart for the mural, and by learning new artmaking skills; that build confidence.

Participation has also produced greater or social wellbeing through strengthening group and community bonds through spending time together, and working towards a common goal.

2.3 Home

A three-month project about the history, present and future of Stockbridge, as told by residents.

Project dates	February to May 2024
Participants	250 including from Stockbridge Village Primary Year 4, St. Albert's Primary School Year 4-5, Flourish and

	Succeed CIC and SBV sewing group (six workshops 1.5-4 hrs. 2 nd – 16 th March)
Artists	Cherie Grist Renshaw
Delivery Partner	For Housing
Funder	For Housing
Project Location	Leach Croft, Waterpark Drive, Stockbridge Village, L28 1NN
Producers	Rhyannon Parry
Workshops	N/A They happened last financial year
Audiences	120 launch attendees 17,197 artwork footfall estimate for the year

Introduction

This project sought to engage communities to take the lead in shaping a cultural offer in their local area. It has presented work in non-traditional venues in order to break down barriers to engagement for the least engaged audience segments.

Context

Local artist Cherie Grist grew up in Stockbridge and was commissioned as a result of her connection to the area and previous work with project partner For Housing, for the 2022 Knowsley Liverpool City Region Borough of Culture.

Process and Description

The artist met with a number of local groups before the workshops began, with the Heart of Glass producer. She felt it essential to do this, to know what people felt about the artistic proposal and to build rapport. She invited people to talk to her about their interests. Once people got to know that the artist grew up in the area, they were more positive about taking part in the project.

The initial plan involved running workshops from a dedicated, local space in the future mural's location, where artworks could be exhibited, and so increase awareness of the future mural. This was intended to serve as inspiration for other potential participants. This was arranged but at short notice the landlord changed their mind. Instead, the artist met with participants in their existing social groups, which suited the participants.

The artistic offer involved designing a geometric pattern using a range of techniques. The artist taught participants a simple technique to create repeated patterns. The image below shows the variety this singular drawing process can generate.



The workshops were curated to encourage conversations about experiences living in and being from Stockbridge Village. For example, the Men's Recovery Group (part of Flourish & Succeed CiC) all spoke about their life journeys, their working experiences; explaining how they came to join this group. In the artist's view they produced the most detailed and intricate artworks. The artist believes the artistic offer contributed to this depth of interaction and also demonstrated the benefit of working with people in groups already familiar to them. The artist documented some of these conversations in a word map as inspiration for the mural. The work of nine participants from different groups was included in the mural.

At St. Albert's Primary School, where Cherie had previously worked, she ran half day workshops with two separate groups, making peace patterns, which provided focus for the children.

In one group the children began singing as they were drawing and this helped the participants to focus on the activity. As a result of this, the artist and Heart of Glass invited the school to sing at the unveiling of the mural.

The project also produced different artistic outputs based on the existing interests and skills of some participants. A sewing group co-created a pattern using different colours. This was printed onto bags for group members to hold their sewing equipment, and also printed onto fabric for participants to make other things, to give back out to the community.

The artist adapted the delivery of the workshop to include the specific interests of some groups.

For the Phoenix Group who play bingo, the artist created a peace pattern based on their bingo numbers.

Cherie re-drew each of the participants' artworks to create a colouring book gifted to every participant.

At the celebration event a participant was interviewed in front of the mural by delivery partner For Housing.

On the first day of painting the mural a resident spoke to the artist about the local Flourish and Succeed CiC organisation, providing positive feedback on the experience of some of the participants and giving their support to the project.

Outputs and Outcomes

Participants were asked for their opinion on their participation in the workshops and the completed mural.

Cherie came to see my local Mens Hive Group and she said that she wanted us to do some collage, art and drawings and she just said to write down words as to what family meant, so I kinda just went with that and ended up really enjoying it and it was really fun to do and involving. It was fun to be part of and it made me feel that I was part of something that I've not had for a long time. I want to say thank you to Cherie for doing it.

We spent 2 hours on a Monday evening with the lads getting together, all different backgrounds. We were asked to come up with a design for the mural and luckily enough, mine got chosen which I'm very proud of. What it's bringing for me is getting those doors opened again for me and just trying to get involved with as much as I can.

Workshop participants

This is the first time I have seen something like this in this community and it is fantastic, sincerely, my kids have been talking about it. When the artwork was being painted I came here every day to see the development, it has been wonderful. I think that it tells what the community stand for: unity, being together, helping ourselves and supporting ourselves.

It's so lovely and it brightens the place up.

I get a positive vibe from it because you've got the kids going into school and they'll be seeing that and different people on the bus and cars going past it, so if it brings a little bit of colour to people, then it's all good.

Local residents attending celebration event



Learning and Legacy

Identifying a single person in the delivery partner organisation, to confirm and lead on their collaboration, is very important to avoid delays that accrue costs. When the painting of a mural is concerned the role of the delivery partner can involve a number of different functions and people within it, so good internal communication within the delivery partner organisation is important.

There is real interest and enthusiasm for continuing the project from workshop participants, and the artist would like to work with other groups who are a part of the local Flourish and Succeed CiC organisation. The legacy of the project therefore depends on maintaining a connection with these people until a point where a follow-on project becomes possible.

As a result of delivering this project, which was the artist's first mural; they have received a new commission for a similar project.

2.4 The Posh Club

A queer cabaret afternoon tea for over 60s in St Helens.

Project dates	06 March 2025
Participants	Consultation with 5 from Torus
Artists	Duckie/ Simon Casson - performers Shirley Classy, Miss Baby Daisy + Matty May
Delivery Partner	Torus and St Helens Council

Project Location	St Helens Town Hall and in person marketing took place on a tour of care homes with Simon from Duckie
Producers	Jenny Watts & Naomi Clifton
Audiences	Over 60's - 173 attendees



Introduction

The Posh Club was invented in Crawley, West Sussex, by Duckie producer Simon Casson and his sister Annie for their Mum who was in her 80s and feeling a bit lonely, after recently moving to the area from Hackney. Annie decided to hold a tea party in her front room for her Mum and her ninety-something neighbours Esther and Frieda – to serve them nice sandwiches and cakes on fancy crockery. The ladies had fun chatting and eating and being served like they were important guests. They discussed their more social early years before they were married and especially the dances and variety shows that used to be more prevalent just after the war before the telly and the family started to dominate people's lives. Annie and Simon decided to hire and decorate the local church hall, dig out some of the old Shirley Bassey and Frank Sinatra albums that their Dad used to play, put on their glad rags and distribute very fancy invitations for all of the neighbours who were senior citizens to attend a daytime soiree.

Simon was tasked with booking a few of the more popular turns from the arty queer cabaret he runs in London as entertainment, whilst Annie made the food and recruited local friends to volunteer as posh waiters. Different formations were trialed over that year until the group were happy with the results. It now runs permanent clubs in Hackney, Hastings, Brighton and Crawley and they run as paid events. The Posh Club

is a performance art project which seeks to tackle loneliness and isolation among older people through performance, connection, and celebration. It is created by Duckie, London's LGBTQ club night and performance collective.

Context

Older people are known to be especially vulnerable to loneliness and social isolation which is known to have negative effects on their mental and physical health. According to Age UK, more than 2 million people in England over the age of 75 live alone and more than one million older people say they go over one month without speaking to a friend, neighbour or family member. A 2015 study suggested loneliness could increase your risk of premature death by up to a quarter and could be as harmful for health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Loneliness is also a strategic concern in St Helens with 21% of the population over 65 years of age² and loneliness a known issue in the town³.

Process and Description

The producers Duckie had worked previously with Heart of Glass in 2015 on 21st Century Music Hall⁴. Duckie has been looking to expand its work into the North and after discussions did a site visit to the town hall and the grand ballroom was seen to be a good venue. Duckie typically runs The Posh Club in pubs, clubs and community centres, deliberately avoiding theatres and art centres which it sees as more associated with middle class arts audiences. A monthly tea dance already operates in the same venue and aimed at older people, disabled people and those experiencing social isolation⁵. However, The Posh Club aims to give older people a live arts experience with a carefully calibrated level of challenge and provocation.

St Helens Town Hall was transformed into a grand tea party with set tables, table service and performances in the main hall and on the stage, including Shirley Classy, That Matty May, and Miss Baby Daisy from Liverpool. More than 150 older adults attended the event, including staff and residents from several care homes. The Mayor of St Helens also attended and, while black-tie waiters served up afternoon tea on vintage crockery.

Angy Williams, Head of Creative People and Places at Heart of Glass, reflected:

"To see so many of our older residents laughing, dancing, and connecting was wonderful. The Posh Club is a perfect example of how the arts can bring people together, and we're delighted to have brought this magical experience to St Helens."

² <https://www.cheshireandmerseyside.nhs.uk/media/s51cmpuq/peoples-plan-2024-2027-v1.pdf>

³ https://www.ivar.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Connecting-Health-Communities-in-St-Helens-Update_March-24.pdf

⁴ <https://www.heartofglass.org.uk/project-and-events/events/duckie-21st-century-music-hall>

⁵ <https://www.thelivewelldirectory.com/Services/9394>

Simon Casson, co-founder of The Posh Club, said:

"St Helens, you did not disappoint! My feet are aching after hitting that polished dance floor in your glorious and glamorous town hall"

Outputs and Outcomes

This one-off event in St Helens was a test bed to explore whether there was appetite for a more regular event in the future. The event was heavily over-subscribed which indicates that there is a high level of demand amongst older people for events such as this.

Learning and Legacy

The event was co-programmed with local older residents as part of Heart of Glass' 10-year anniversary celebrations. It aligns with the organisation's commitment to supporting vibrant, inclusive cultural experiences within the borough.

This sort of work, when conceived as a regular event, is driven by concerns around recognition, communication of worth/hope, material exchange, social connection, reciprocal concern. The long established examples of clubs in the South East show its potential to initiate change beyond the individual. The Posh Club seems to provide older people with openings through which they can locate opportunities to enter into relationships in a *different* way and a *different* time. This temporal orientation is toward the future but perhaps it is most compelling in how it stays with the present and attends to the past. The Posh Club offers a way of making, or remaking social connections in the present, and in this way is connected to people's struggles, but these do not become the focus, and first, it insists we must connect *at all*. Here, the possibilities of social connection are really valuable and new subjectivities can also arise. In this vision, older people can emerge as historically present, contextual, relational and open to new experiences – not deficit figures seen as unwell, isolated and a drain on society's scarce resources.

Artistically the starting point is from a set of practices and relationships predicated on enjoyment, social connection and reciprocity. It offers a way of nurturing older people's potentialities against a daunting situation of isolation, relative poverty and depleted social value. This provides a sense of hope in its sheer groundedness.

Conversations are underway to explore future editions of The Posh Club in Merseyside.

2.5 How to Look After a Grieving Elephant (And Other Social Animals)

A project working with young people exploring their grief.

Project dates	April 2024 to Dec 2024
Participants	Child Bereavement UK support group
Artists	Jenny Gaskell
Delivery Partner	Wonder Arts, Child Bereavement UK, Willowbrook Hospice
Funder	Wonder Arts
Project Location	Workshops - Willowbrook Hospice, St Helens Living Well Café, St Helens Library, Newton Le Willows Library, St Helens Crematorium
Producers	Rhyannon Parry and Danny Woods
Workshops	49 attendees over 8 workshops
Audiences	19 x launch event attendees 179,000 x online listeners radio interviews

Introduction

How to Look After a Grieving Elephant (and other social animals) is a children's participatory art project about grief, by artist Jenny Gaskell. The aim for this project is to get children and adults talking about grief, how we might care for each other, and of course, to have fun along the way

Working with children aged 5-10, Jenny is researching how some animals act differently when an animal close to them dies. Over a series of art workshops, games and crafts, our collaborators are learning about some of the ways that animals - including elephants, giraffes, whales and wolves - share their grief, and how we can look after ourselves as humans too.

The Grief Helpline for Social Animals

The thoughts, findings and feelings shared during our workshops have inspired an audio art project: The Grief Helpline for Social Animals. Starting on National Grief Awareness Week 2024, this thoughtful installation will travel to different St Helens

locations, where visitors are invited to pick up a phone receiver and listen to children's heartfelt advice on how to care for grieving animals.

The Grief Helpline for Social Animals provides a wealth of information on how social animals experience grief, how to look after ourselves, and each other too. Listeners will hear children's perspectives on empathy, care, and support, shared in the warm, honest voices of young people. This installation opens up a compassionate way to consider grief and loss, inspired by the ways animals naturally support each other.

Context

get people talking about grief and considering how we can care for one another during these times. Willowbrook Hospice is a specialist palliative care unit that offers a holistic approach to care for patients and families. It describes itself as 'not just a building but a culture'. The children who took part in this project all had experiences of grief where a family member had spent time at this hospice. Child Bereavement UK helped us to build these relationships and form the group.

Living Well Café

St Helens Library

St Helens Crematorium

SoundCloud <https://soundcloud.com/user-553957247/sets/the-grief-helpline-for-social-animals>

Process and Description

Artist Jenny Gaskell has a long standing grief-based practice and alongside her work as a creative consultant is a hospice worker and a funeral celebrant. She was given a bursary and invited by Heart of Glass and Wonder Arts to develop a collaborative community project on death and grief. She was committed to ensuring that the project would avoid those who took part reliving trauma. Jenny conceived of a project in which children could learn about animals dying, for example that wolves, who are well known to be pack animals, separate themselves from the pack when they are close to death. She felt that looking at how animals die would be a good way of approaching the subject sideways, "in a slightly hands off approach". And, that by becoming experts they would then be able to explain what they had learnt to adults and to other children.

The project has been realised as a partnership between Heart of Glass, Jenny Gaskell, Wonder Arts, Child Bereavement UK and WillowBrook Hospice where the workshops for the project took place.

Outputs and Outcomes

The Grief Helpline for Social Animals has 13 audio recordings which provide information on how social animals experience grief, how to look after ourselves, and each other too. Listeners hear children's perspectives on empathy, care, and support, shared in the warm, honest voices of young people.

This has also been made available to experience via a phone installation at locations in St Helens (2024-25), The Helpline opens up a compassionate way to consider grief and loss, inspired by the ways animals naturally support each other.

Children co-wrote the scripts for the telephone helpline and another set of young people

Learning and Legacy

The project has helped staff at Wonder Arts to consider how it approaches conversations about things that children are worried about, such as grandparents dying.

Danny Woods from Wonder Arts described how “as someone who facilitates work with young people, this project has really helped me learn how to approach difficult conversations, because adults often try to protect too much”.

Jenny Gaskell described how valuable the partnerships with Wonder Arts and Child Bereavement UK had been. Jenny, who has worked with children before, learned a huge amount from Wonder Arts how to make spaces (physical and psychological) to work with children and young people. And Child Bereavement UK had provided training to everyone in the project on how to be careful in working with young people around death and grief. Jenny said “young people need to have direct conversations. Adults tend to use euphemisms in talking about death and dying and this is often confusing to children”.

The next phase of the project in 2025-2026 will explore if and how this can be made into a school specific project.

4. Discussion

Since its inception, Heart of Glass has sought to embed its practices in local communities, where it can build on and help to reimagine existing local cultural practices and traditions. St Helens continues to be an ethnically homogenous and culturally conservative town and Heart of Glass has always sought to respect ‘what is’ and ‘has been’ while setting in motion cultural processes able to prefigure ‘what might become’. It has proved itself capable of commissioning and developing artists able to produce art and culture out of existing sources of energy, interest and opportunity, as well as bringing in new ideas and forms in order to create previously unimagined cultural expressions.

This section summarises the extent to which Heart of Glass has met the primary CPP aims which are driven by three key research questions.

4.1 Are more people from places of least engagement experiencing and inspired by creativity and culture and what are the most effective ways to achieve this?

Heart of Glass has worked with artists, children and families, refugees, asylum seekers and migrants, disabled people, older people, LGBTQIA+ and communities of all kinds. The emphasis of some practices (e.g. in Strong Women) has been on creating spaces and practices in which people can support and learn from each other, through creative journeys of inquiry and exploration. In other practices (e.g. The Posh Club) the emphasis has been on providing older people with an enjoyable opportunity to enter into relationships in a *different* way and a *different* time and hence to reduce loneliness and isolation. The organisation continues to be committed to the belief that every person has the right to have their voice heard, stories celebrated and curiosity ignited.

Heart of Glass has also reached new participants and audiences through co-designing, co-commissioning and co-producing engaging projects and agreeing partnerships with a variety of new partner organisations with different constituencies (for example, Centre 63, Willowbrook Hospice and Knowsley Archive). Strong Women has a combined audience to date of 51,234. The combined active participant figures for this year are:

Project level examples:

In *Buzz Hub*, the novel form of artmaking and the meaningful, personal and political subject matter of the project engaged people interested in oral history, including mothers, parents, children, and other local groups across the borough. Learning about the history of local women and using specific artmaking techniques proved to be an effective way of engaging people in libraries and other community venues. A varied and high level of engagement was also achieved through having a long lead-in time to develop relationships and plan workshops with many different groups across the borough.

Home managed to engage 250 people including from primary schools, recovery groups and a sewing club in order to stage conversations about experiences living in and being from Stockbridge Village.

Through *How to Look After a Grieving Elephant* nearly 50 children, as well as partner organisations, were engaged in a project exploring grief; the project also provided the basis for a larger school based project.

The Posh Club successfully engaged more than 160 older adults, including staff and residents from several care homes.

4.2 What approaches enable us to deliver on our aspiration for excellence, both in the process of community engagement and the creative and cultural experiences on offer?

Models of community involvement

In, the '2022-2025 Business Plan Heart of Glass commits to “a strong community voice in relation to both decision-making processes and the realisation of ambitious artwork.” The Community Role Methodology and Approach is conceived in terms of five types

Community As Activator: A project or concept that is realised through engagement by community participants. An invitation is presented and the project can only be realised with the active participation of community members.

Project level example: *The Posh Club* is a cabaret experience. The event was only made possible by the energy and enthusiasm of the people who attended the event. Invitees were approached both through existing partnerships and via media promotion.

Community As Co-Creator: A project that is realised through the shared collaborative effort, ideas and concepts of an artist and community.

Project level example: *How to look after a Grieving Elephant* was an idea developed by artist Jenny Gaskill based on conversations with partners. The idea was further developed through workshops with participants.

Community As Co-Maker: Physically making the work like tiles or models for sculptures.

Project level example: *Buzz Hub* commissions artists worked with the community to physically make a piece of work for a sculptural trail.

Community Experts: Recognising the importance of community knowledge, community research can (and quite often does) act as a stimulant to develop programmes that respond to the demographic.

Project level example: *Strong Women*, the knowledge local people had of strong women's histories and heritage sparked the proposal from Carrie to bring this knowledge together and use it as a focus for a public artwork experience in our area and of our community.

Community As Commissioner: Artist and project commissioning process led by community members. Community members will select an artist with guidance from Producers at Heart of Glass, who present a project and request feedback and sign off by a group.

Project level example: Huyton Station was recently adopted to commission work with the Local Independent Business Network.

These different models and modes of socially engaged practice, provide different ways that projects come about, supporting a diverse range of artists' processes and

practices, which are in turn adaptable to the needs, wants, wishes and priorities of local networks and organisational partners. What is important to note, due to the different meanings of the term, is that the Heart of Glass producer role is a community engagement role that also requires artistic knowledge and awareness, because the role initiates and supports the relationships between project artists and participants.

The Continuing Value of Partnerships

ACE was clear at the outset of the CPP programme that it wanted it to be seen as an action research programme, realised through partnerships in different areas and through which it would be possible to test and try out different approaches. Crucial to Heart of Glass' approach across more than 10 years has been a sustained effort to maintain active partnerships.

All staff have long established skills in initiating and developing relationships with organisations and individuals who have existing relationships with potential new participants and audiences. We are able to argue with clarity that Heart of Glass initiates and sustains partnerships, networks and relationships that draw more people into contact with high quality art, and which also support social capital, community connectivity and solidarity. There are, of course, interesting questions about what people do as a result of these experiences, and it is clear that many people who have taken part in Heart of Glass projects have been prompted to do new things either on their own or with other people.

Project level examples:

In *How to Care for a Grieving Elephant* the artist and producer managed to open a space for co-learning, in which a small group explored ideas together, drawing in the different knowledge and forms of expertise of all participants and partners. Hence, there was an emphasis on collaboration, care taking (but NOT protectionism), shared responsibility and social learning. By creating this sort of space, all participants and partners were able to learn new things, to solve problems together and to find novel ways to communicate this learning to broader publics.

In *Buzz Hub* the approaches used supported ACEs aspiration for excellence, both in the process of community engagement and the creative and cultural experiences on offer.

In *Strong Women*, the active participation in the mural making process or in researching local history is complemented by viewing the finished murals and being able to listen to a series of four podcasts involving different members of the core delivery team and community members, targeting different audiences for the project (Conversations over a Brew, Season Five, Episodes 1-4). A key feature of achieving excellence is the commitment and skills of the leading artist and the benefit to the whole of the core delivery team of having already run the project once in St Helens.

In *Home*, these objectives were achieved by working with a local artist with both an attachment to and lived-knowledge of the area, and an artist with a well-developed, accessible and adaptable artistic proposal. By making the creative activity simple, and providing guidance; participants had more freedom to be creative and feed their ideas into the development of the final design.

4.3 What else are we learning that facilitates better public engagement in creativity and culture?

Responding the important social issues generated in conversation with communities

Heart of Glass's Building Blocks 2023-2026 conveys its commitment to operating in solidarity with the community, working towards a fairer, more just and more caring society for all.

"Putting care, connection, and collective action at the centre of everything we do, our approach is based on open, transparent, and collaborative practice, recognising, and equally valuing, the contributions of the artists, individuals, communities, producers, and activists we work with to our overall mission and vision, and in their own right."

Added to this, the CPP research questions provide an important framework and set of principles, but also open out important questions about programmatic plans and priorities and how these meet this vision. We continue to see the ways in which, perhaps especially since the Covid 19 pandemic, that the structural haunts the transformative possibility of social practice just as it does in other areas of social practice. We can see that the programme continues to wrestle with questions about which collective forms of power can take shape out of the connections and reciprocities it seeks to generate, tap into and transform.

In the projects we have engaged with this year we see processes predicated on recognition, communication of worth/hope, material exchange, social connection, reciprocal concern, collective effort and change beyond the individual. These processes have been framed within a new literature on Generative Justice, which explores practices and relationships predicated on social connection and reciprocity. Projects such as Strong Women, How to Look After a Grieving Elephant and Buzz Hub develop practices which seek to allow those with lived experience of the issues, systems and contexts they seek new understands of, to be seen, treated and to feel like epistemic agents able to hold onto, to value and to bring in their own ideas and experiences in, throughout the work. Hence artists and producers have to commit to entering a field of struggle through forms of practice and relating based on co-production, mutual recognition, material exchange. In previous work with Heart of Glass (Roy et al. 2017) we have conceived the value of these practices in terms of the difference between sympathy and empathy. Sympathetic responses to social issues such as the isolation of older people tend to sustain the gap between the sympathiser

and sympathised with (Malone, 2017). In contrast, empathetic responses seek to generate a position of togetherness. The the 'care-full' ethics of projects such as *How to Look After a Grieving Elephant* and *The Posh Club* are predicated on generating the conditions for togetherness, for co-learning, in which people can be seen, heard and recognised in terms of their own knowledge(s), experience(s) and value(s) and in which the artist is seen as a 'relational self', whose practice is embedded in concrete relationships with the other people' who choose to take part (Bishop, 2012: 55).

These forms of social practice require both care and provocation. Provocation requires engaging the faculty for critical social curiosity both by the artist and those who take part as collaborators or audience members. It requires an approach that takes the town and its people seriously as co-subjects of an artistic inquiry, rather than as objects of amusement, interest or care. In this way artists continue to contribute to the action research imperative of the programme, by being given the freedom to repress what Claire Bishop (2012: 39) has called the 'super-egoic injunction' to make things better, and, instead, to prioritise the investigative possibilities provided by pursuing their own 'gnawing social curiosity'. In this way *The Posh Club* addresses the vital social issues of loneliness and social isolation amongst older people in a way that is empathetic, focused on enjoyment, social exchange and celebration of the moment, but which is also creatively provocative. And *How to Look After a Grieving Elephant* the project was predicated on a belief that adults can learn about things from children and children can learn about things from adults. The project encourages honesty about the challenges of discussing grief with young people, but manages to avoid unconsciously giving in to protectionist reflexes. This recognises that the rights to participate are immutable, that is they exist for everyone including for children who have experienced grief, and there is a responsibility to engage in resourcing and safety planning to realise this right (Agbontean et al. 2025).

The producer role

There has always been a certain distinctiveness in how the producer role is understood at Heart of Glass, which we have described before in terms of four dimensions:

The point of contact with the community and/or audience for the project.

The relationship with the artist whose creative expertise is brought into relation with that of the community as the work develops.

Support for the process throughout the project through consistent presence.

Skills in the technical aspects of logistics, risk assessment, project management and planning.

Artists bring their own experiences and assumptions about the town to their work in St Helens. Hence, one central facet of the producer role is to test and work through these in discussion and, where necessary, to challenge and help artists to reframe their

proposals. In this way, Heart of Glass expects its producers to initiate and ‘mind’ the relational conditions in which the work can begin and develop. Suzanne Dempsey-Sawin talked about ‘mediating trust’, a term which beautifully captures the fact that this role operates in-between the artist and the community. This is why Heart of Glass producers accompany the project throughout, attending as many of the workshops or other processes that constitute the work, as is needed. This is partly about providing a high level of support for the artist, attending to issues that allow them to focus on the artwork, and it’s also partly about a programmatic commitment to taking the communities of St Helens seriously as equivalent subjects.

Project level examples:

In *The Posh Club*, Simon Casson brought his own lived-experience of older people and similar work to St Helens, but this was mediated through the partnership with Torus Housing, St Helens Council and local producers to create an event which would appeal to a local audience.

In *How to Care for a Grieving Elephant*, the respectful collaboration between the artist and producer was central to opening a space for co-learning, in which the different knowledge and forms of expertise of all participants and partners could be seen and recognised.

Reflections on earlier prototype projects prompted Heart of Glass to reconsider the producer role and its importance in this often challenging new field of practice. The *Buzz Hub* Incubator Projects have allowed Heart of Glass to reconsider whether this type of practice can be meaningful and appropriate for artists, participants, as well as contributing the work of community partners.

5. Conclusions

5.1 Are more people from places of least engagement experiencing and inspired by creativity and culture and what are the most effective ways to achieve this?

Heart of Glass has continued to provide the opportunity for a wide range of communities in St Helens and Knowsley to be inspired by and to engage with excellent art and culture. The organisation continues to be committed to the belief that every person has the right to have their voice heard, stories celebrated and curiosity ignited. This year Heart of Glass has reached new participants and audiences through all of their programme. By continuing to root its work in communities of different sorts, it has been able to develop spaces which expand the sense of possibility, for example around discussing grief, as well as critical awareness and appreciation of the lives of women.

5.2 What approaches enable us to deliver on our aspiration for excellence, both in the process of community engagement and the creative and cultural experiences on offer?

Heart of Glass continues to commission artists capable of making and co-producing art and culture in collaboration with local people and an expanding range of local partners. The projects which are part of this year's evaluation have engaged with a very broad demographic in St Helens and Knowsley and have successfully developed new ideas, new forms of creativity, and important forms of cultural expressions among people in the town and in some cases to much larger audiences. The Heart of Glass approach to producing supports the creation of spaces of imaginative potential which foster the psychological and social conditions of creativity. The producers work carefully with artists and partners in order to attend to the process with care and this is at the heart of the work, and of providing a high level of support for the artist, the community, the audience and other partners.

These six models of community involvement provide a way to conceive for different models and modes of socially engaged practice, provide different ways that projects come about, supporting a diverse range of artists' processes and practices, which are in turn adaptable to the needs, wants, wishes and priorities of local networks and organisational partners.

Crucial to Heart of Glass' approach across more than 10 years has been a sustained effort to maintain active partnerships and we are able to argue with clarity that Heart of Glass initiates and sustains partnerships, networks and relationships that draw more people into contact with high quality art, and which also support social capital, community connectivity and solidarity.

5.3 What else are we learning that facilitates better public engagement in creativity and culture?

Heart of Glass's Building Blocks 2023-2026 it conveys its commitment to operating in solidarity with the community, working towards a fairer, more just and more caring society for all. Throughout the report we discuss examples of the ways in which the Heart of Glass's practices embody this model of democratic empowerment which recognises the distinctive contributions of artists, communities, producers, partners, audiences and the programme. Projects such as How to Care for a Grieving Elephant demonstrate an understanding that relationships don't need to be symmetrical in order to be equal. In this way, artist expertise is legitimised, seen and understood as a form of 'reflexive' practice' which supports project and programme objectives.

We continue to see the ways in which, perhaps especially since the Covid 19 pandemic, that the structural haunts the transformative possibility of social practice just as it does in other areas of social practice. Projects such as The Posh Club,

proactively, positively and with a sense of fun, wrestle with questions about which collective forms of power can take shape out of the connections and reciprocities it seeks to generate, tap into and transform.

Once again, the active involvement of producers allows both the artist and the community collaborators to be recognised as 'inquiring agents' who are both knowing and unknowing. It is in this shared space of unknowing that a potential for new knowledge emerges through the work people do together.