

Northern Heartlands 'Turning the Hourglass' Final Evaluation Report



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Northern Heartlands CIO

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Introduction



Northern Heartlands' Turning the Hourglass project (June 2021 – June 2023) worked with two rural communities coping with socio-economic deprivation and isolation, and who had little access to creative or cultural activities. Turning the Hourglass was funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation's Arts Access and Participation Fund¹, which addresses inequalities of opportunity to access and participate in the arts, and seeks to achieve the following long-term outcomes²:

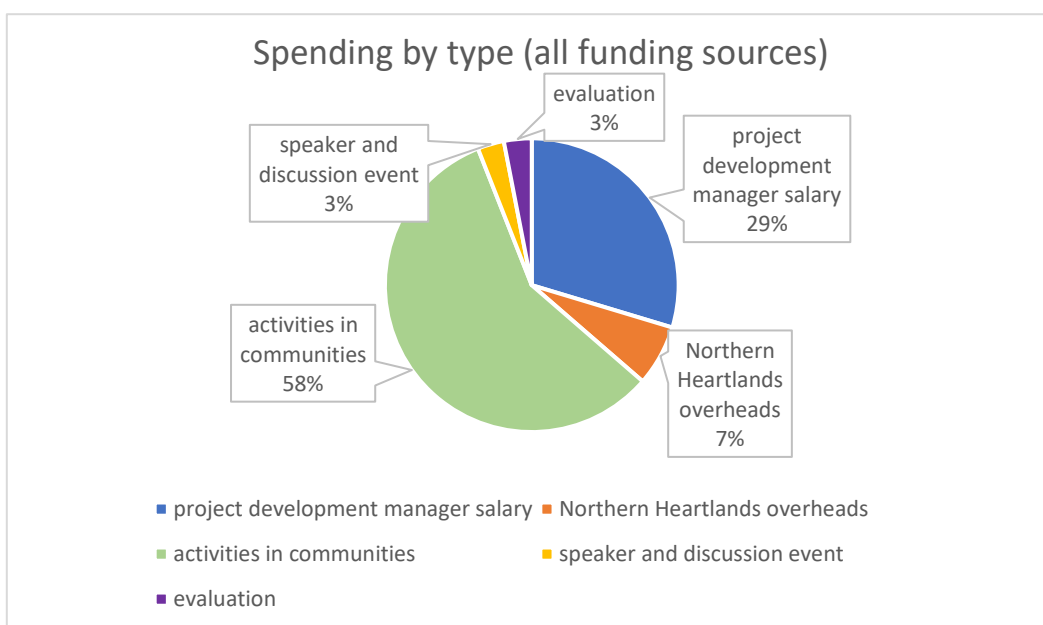
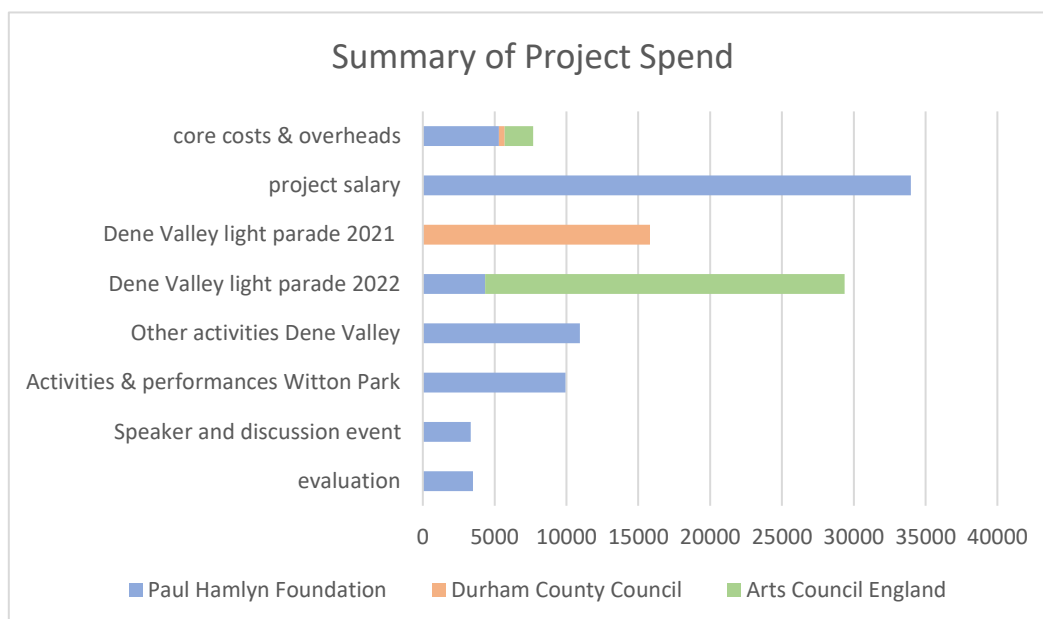
- an ecology of arts provision that works better – individually and collectively – for all kinds of people and communities.
- Communities that are empowered to make decisions about their cultural lives and able to access the resources and partnerships they need to pursue these ambitions.
- an arts and cultural system that is more diverse and inclusive in its leadership and workforce, with many more people in these roles coming from communities which currently experience inequality and discrimination.

Funding of £76,000 was granted by Paul Hamlyn Foundation in June 2021 for work across both communities, including 0.5 salary contribution for the Project Development Manager, who led community engagement, project development and management throughout. Northern Heartlands raised additional funds of £16,123 from Durham County Council

¹ <https://www.phf.org.uk/funds/access-and-participation-fund/>

² Paul Hamlyn Foundation Arts Access and Participation Fund: Purpose of the Fund
<https://www.phf.org.uk/funds/access-and-participation-fund/#purpose-of-the-fund>

(October 2021) and £27,035 from Arts Council England (October 2022) for two winter light parades and associated activities in Dene Valley.



Turning the Hourglass focussed on two rural communities in County Durham – Eldon & Dene Valley, and Witton Park – both comprising former ‘Category D’ villages. Unique to County Durham, Category D villages³ endured decades of underinvestment and partial demolition in the twentieth century, with ongoing legacies of deprivation and ‘social haunting’, a concept that describes how historic community-level trauma can impact on present communities⁴. In both communities, there are residents whose families have lived there for generations

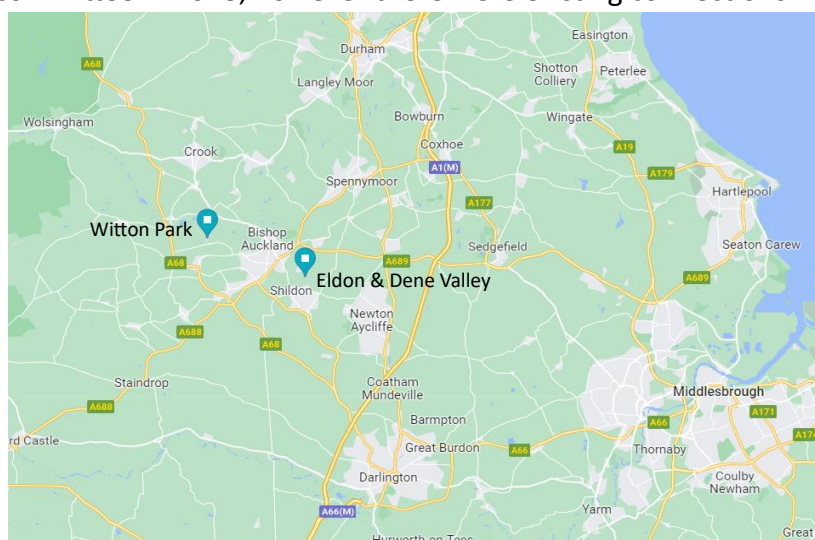
³ [Planning for decline: the ‘D’-village policy of County Durham, UK: Planning Perspectives: Vol 19, No 3 \(tandfonline.com\)](https://www.tandfonline.com)

⁴ Avery, G. F. (2011). Some thoughts on haunting and futurity. *Borderlands*, 10 (2), 1–21

and residents who have moved into the area. Both communities were emerging from covid lockdowns at the beginning of the project, with ongoing disruption to community activities and groups. Both communities had poor access to cultural provision due to physical and economic isolation, and very little self-generated cultural or creative activity.

Eldon & Dene Valley are within the LSOAs of Coundon Grange and Eldon, with a population of 3321 (project area estimated at 2700), and ranked in the 1st and 2nd deciles of the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019⁵. The area is a collection of hamlets with a primary school, convenience store and an existing community organisation (Dene Valley Community Partnership) which runs community activities such as a drop-in group. Challenges facing residents include underemployment, with a 10% unemployed claimant rate in June 2021⁶, and poverty, with 51% of children living in low-income families (2021)⁷ and a fuel poverty rate of 19.6% in 2020⁸. When Turning the Hourglass started, a key social hub in Dene Valley was the Heritage Café, however this closed to customers in late 2022.

Witton Park is a smaller community (pop. 450, estimated), which has a village hall, chapel and primary school, but no social hubs such as a shop or cafe. It is within the LSOA of Escomb West, ranked in the 3rd decile of the Index of Multiple Deprivation, with 31.4% of children living in low-income families (2021) and a fuel poverty rate of 14.8% in 2020⁹. Northern Heartlands has been working with residents of Dene Valley since 2018, funded by the NLHF/ACE Great Place Scheme and by Durham County Council. In contrast, Northern Heartlands had not engaged the community of Witton Park prior to this project, apart from contact with the village hall committee in 2018, however there were existing connections including a member of staff living in the village.



⁵ Durham Insight <https://www.durhaminsight.info/quick-profiles-all-geographies/> Overviews of Eldon LSOA & Coundon Grange LSOA

⁶ Average for both LSOAs. Eldon 8.9%; Coundon Grange 11.2% <https://www.durhaminsight.info/quick-profiles-all-geographies/>

⁷ Average for both LSOAs. Eldon 45.6%; Coundon Grange 56.4% <https://www.durhaminsight.info/quick-profiles-all-geographies/>

⁸ Durham Insight <https://www.durhaminsight.info/quick-profiles-all-geographies/> Overviews of Eldon LSOA & Coundon Grange LSOA

⁹ <https://www.durhaminsight.info/quick-profiles-all-geographies/> Overview of Escomb West LSOA

2. Evaluation methods



Approach

The approach taken in this evaluation was informed by the aims of the Arts and Participation Fund, by Northern Heartlands project proposal, discussion with staff about their resources and working practice, and by specific issues relating to the two communities. A key outcome for Northern Heartlands from Turning the Hourglass was to gain improved understanding of the processes and barriers involved in community-led participatory arts practice. Similarly, the Paul Hamlyn Foundation states that one of the aims of the Arts Access and Participation Fund is “to enable organisations to build stronger evidence about what works, so that they can better understand and improve their practice, share learning and have greater impact.”

Prior to this evaluation I was Head of Learning for Northern Heartlands Great Place Scheme for three years, a consultant for two years and acted as evaluator for individual projects. I have a detailed understanding of Northern Heartlands’ practice, existing relationships with staff and artists, and prior experience of the communities and the issues that they face. This places me somewhere between an external and internal evaluator, allowing independence while also incorporating some of the benefits ascribed to internal evaluation, such as “subjectivity, context-sensitivity, local wisdom, and real-world understanding of complexity”¹⁰.

A standard evaluation methodology uses mixed quantitative and qualitative methods, with a focus on participant feedback and questionnaires. However, there are criticisms of this approach for community arts projects because they are highly complex, subject to change and can lead to unexpected or contradictory outcomes¹¹. This description accurately

¹⁰ Leanne M. Kelly (2021): A clash of values: Deep-rooted discord between empowering, participatory, community-driven development and results-focused, evidence-based evaluation, Community Development, DOI: 10.1080/15575330.2021.1936101

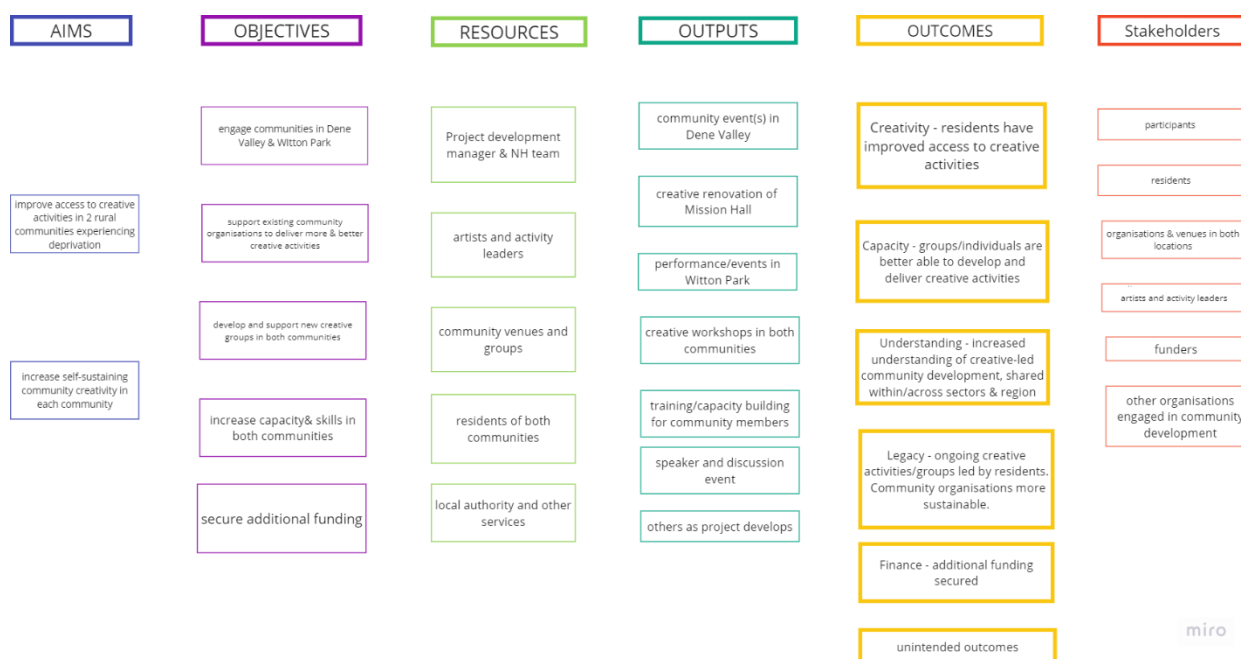
¹¹ Maia Mackney & Toby Young (2021): Embracing the messiness: a creative approach to participatory arts evaluation, Cultural Trends, DOI: 10.1080/09548963.2021.2000330

describes Northern Heartlands' activities with the communities of Eldon & Dene Valley and Witton Park during a period of changing covid restrictions, which went beyond delivering an event or activity. Essential functions included listening and facilitation with residents and participants, artistic research, response and support to participants, and negotiating local bureaucracy or hyper-local politics.

The complexity of such practice includes “complexity within individuals, complexity in relationships with and between practitioners and community recipients, and in the norm and mores of their political and cultural settings”¹². As noted by Mackay and Young¹³, standard evaluation can be a “somewhat blunt tool for a nuanced analysis of a project in which participants [are] challenging their perceptions, redefining their identities, and critically exploring their social context.” There is a risk that reliance on a linear theory of change and quantitative data can lead to the evaluation and project being “in two separate dimensions: the dimension of simplified rules, and the complex reality of life”¹⁴.

For the reasons listed, this evaluation focuses as much on the perceptions about process of those involved – participants, residents, local stakeholders, artists and Northern Heartlands staff – as it does about delivery of outputs and achieving stated outcomes.

Framework



¹² Leanne M. Kelly (2021): A clash of values: Deep-rooted discord between empowering, participatory, community-driven development and results-focused, evidence-based evaluation, Community Development, DOI: 10.1080/15575330.2021.1936101

¹³ Maia Mackney & Toby Young (2021): Embracing the messiness: a creative approach to participatory arts evaluation, Cultural Trends, DOI: 10.1080/09548963.2021.2000330

¹⁴ Lowe and Wilson, 2017, quoted in Leanne M. Kelly (2021): A clash of values: Deep-rooted discord between empowering, participatory, community-driven development and results-focused, evidence-based evaluation, Community Development, DOI: 10.1080/15575330.2021.1936101

The project outcomes and an evaluation framework were derived from bid documents and discussion with Northern Heartlands staff. Because of the delayed start, consultation of wider stakeholders was not practical, and the framework applies only to outcomes that can be practically assessed within the two-year timescale. Based on their experience working with communities in the area, Northern Heartlands stated that a very light touch approach to evaluation was required because residents might be sensitive to anything viewed as officious or coming from a position of authority. In addition, digital poverty excluded the use of apps or online forms. It was agreed that simple paper feedback forms would be appropriate for scheduled indoor activities, however literacy cannot be assumed and there wasn't enough staff capacity to complete forms with participants, therefore it was accepted that completion rates might be low in some settings. The outdoor events in 2021 and 2022 took place in December, so handing out paper forms to audiences at night was impractical. Instead, a film-maker was commissioned to produce two videos about the light parade events, including interviews with audiences and participants. Online forms were used for participants at the speaker and discussion event in May 2023.

As well as attending and observing events, I conducted semi-structured interviews with participants, stakeholders, artists and Northern Heartlands staff, and Northern Heartlands staff took part in two reflective discussions about activity in each community. All responses are anonymous and identifying details have been removed. Feedback data was collated and summarised, while 9 hours of audio recordings of reflective interviews and discussions were transcribed and coded.

Data		
Community participants attending indoor activities	Paper feedback forms. Observation.	109 responses
Participants at Speaker and Discussion event	Online feedback forms. Observation.	16 responses
Audiences and participants of winter light parades	Video documentary, including short interviews. Observation.	2 videos created https://youtu.be/ukDZ221z7t4 https://youtu.be/Mwg27zF_tvA
Residents involved in the project as volunteers.	Interviews; video interview.	4 (3 Witton Park, 1 Dene Valley); 1 (Dene Valley)
Stakeholders (community organisations and local government)	Interviews.	3 (1 Witton Park, 2 Dene Valley)
Artists	Interviews.	3 artists with different practices and levels of involvement.
Northern Heartlands staff	Interviews; Reflective discussions.	2 staff interviewed at different stages; 2 reflective discussions.

For any evaluation it is necessary to recognise limitations, which in this case are related to resource available for evaluating arts-led community development. Extensive data collection of the kind required to fully understand the complex dynamics within community practice is recognised as “rarely either practical or cost effective for evaluators working on short term contracts with limited time allocations”¹⁵, so the data collected is realistic within resources, rather than ideal. The data does not include the perspectives and views of residents who didn't engage with the project, or of people who engaged with the project but not the evaluation. Some of the participants declined to take part in interviews or did not respond to requests.

I was asked to cover the evaluation of Turning the Hourglass in April 2022, after the project had already been running for six months. This was due to problems Northern Heartlands encountered in recruiting an evaluator. The late start meant that some preparatory steps were not in completed and monitoring data from activities in the first quarter of the project was not collected in a form that could be used in this evaluation.



¹⁵ Maia Mackney & Toby Young (2021) Ibid.

3. Project delivery



Between 2021 and 2023, Northern Heartlands engaged in community outreach, development and co-design of creative workshops, physical artworks, outdoor events and performances in both communities, all of which were free for participants and audiences. Over the project period Northern Heartlands commissioned 10 artists, 8 musicians and performers, a film maker and a local photographer, and contracted local companies to provide services and support activity such as refreshments, marketing materials, event management and installing the Christmas trees. Northern Heartlands also provided mentoring and support to a newly formed community group in Eldon & Dene Valley. The activities delivered were:

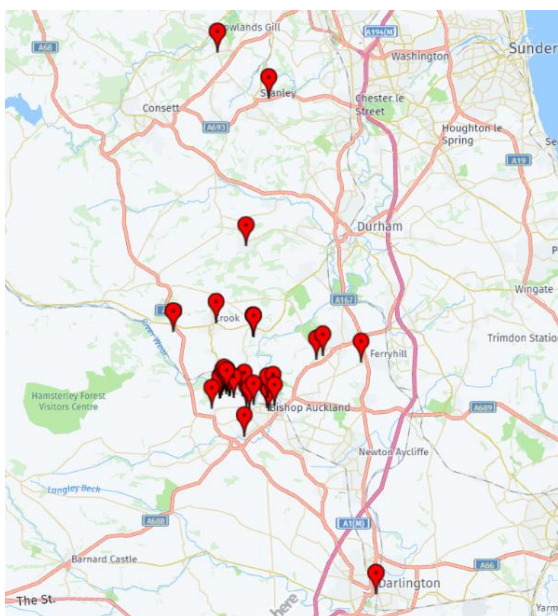
- Halloween linked activities at Witton Park in October 2021, with 2 story gathering workshops, a professional/community outdoor performance, and three craft sessions for children during half term. 92 participants, 30 audience.
- A winter lantern parade, lantern-making workshops and installation of the village's first ever Christmas tree in Eldon & Dene Valley during November and December 2021. There were twelve lantern-making sessions in the school and community, including an artist-led session teaching residents how to build lanterns. The parade included a samba band and stilt walkers with 100 community participants and an estimated audience of 500, as well as free food, Santa's grotto and switching on the Christmas tree lights. Shortlisted for North East Culture Awards 2022.
- A co-designed project to improve the external appearance of the Mission Hall, Eldon & Dene Valley. Creative workshops in Eldon & Dene Valley in 2022 used residents' photos and newspaper articles to create cyanotype images and collages, which were then used to create external hoardings for the Mission Hall. These were installed in March 2023 after planning permission was granted.
- Tickets and transport for 30 residents to attend a performance of a play about Category D villages.
- Tickets and transport for Eldon & Dene Valley residents to attend the 2022 North East Culture Awards ceremony in Durham Cathedral.

- Northern Heartlands enabled Eldon & Dene Valley residents to attend and input into the City of Culture Durham meetings as part of the bidding process in 2022, including meeting national judges.
- A Halloween sculpture trail in Witton Park in October 2022, and craft workshops at the village hall during half term. Total 126 participants.
- Free weekly creative and craft sessions in Witton Park methodist chapel, November and December 2022. Total 85 participations.
- Wall-length murals for the multi-use games area in Witton Park, created by a local artist working with Brownies and Guides.
- Mentoring and financial assistance to a new community group in Eldon & Dene Valley, which was established in January 2022 and supported to deliver the second lantern parade in December 2022.
- A second Dene Valley winter lantern parade and associated activities, November and December 2022. 12 community workshops and 5 school workshops. 130 community participants, and an estimated audience of 500. Featured in the Northern Echo newspaper. Workshops included upskilling sessions for residents to pass on lantern making skills.
- Speaker and discussion event at The Witham, Barnard Castle in May 2023, exploring issues around arts-led community development, with speakers from the Auckland Project, On Our Radar and Place Labs, discussion groups and a shared creative activity. Participants included representatives from Durham University, local and county councils, arts organisations and environmental organisations, as well as local freelance artists and interested residents.

Improved access to creative activities.

The range and coverage of activities clearly demonstrate that Northern Heartlands met the project aim of improving access to creative activities for residents in both communities for the period of the project. In Dene Valley, 31 workshops were delivered in the school and community settings, with each winter light parade involving around 100 local participants and drawing an estimated audience of more than 500. At Witton Park, there were 296 participations in creative workshops, in a village with a population of 450.

The delivered activities were not the same as those set out in the project proposal as they were informed by deeper conversations with residents. In Eldon & Dene Valley, the project began in June so it wasn't practical to organise a summer festival as proposed, and in any case the conversations with residents raised the importance for the community of having events around Christmas, especially following two bleak covid Christmases. This developed into the winter light parade and setting up a Christmas tree. Similarly, in Witton Park, events were delivered at Halloween because this was identified in discussion with residents as a time that had previously been important in the village year, but which had been disrupted by covid.



In terms of reach, it is interesting to note that while the workshop activities in Eldon & Dene Valley attracted residents from the local area, participant postcode data from the creative workshops in Witton Park shows a wide geographical reach, extending access to creative activities well beyond the project area.

13% of respondents in Witton Park identified as disabled, and in both locations more than 90% of workshop participants identified as female, which is a common finding in creative projects¹⁶. All participants who provided feedback about the workshops agreed that they'd 'had fun' and the activity was well

organised. Although these are small communities, 94% of respondents in Eldon & Dene Valley said that they'd met new people at the lantern-making workshops, as did 84% of respondents at the Witton Park craft activities.



The feedback forms provided a free text option for the 'best things' about the session, and in Witton Park the most common response was taking part in a creative activity. Combined with the reach of these workshops, this suggests an unmet desire for creative activities across the wider area.

¹⁶ For example, national evaluation of the Thriving Communities social prescribing programme found that 71% of participants were female. Wavehill, 2022. *Evaluation of the Thriving Communities Fund* (full report p 21) <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/thriving-communities-fund-evaluation-report>



In contrast, responses from Dene Valley and Eldon put more emphasis on working together for the community and “for a common purpose”, which may reflect the perception of the light parades as a wider community project.

In both communities people also listed being in a warm place and free food as a ‘best thing’, reflecting the reality of poverty and the cost of living crisis.

Participant feedback and interviewees commented on the impact of the creative provision by Northern Heartlands:

"The magnitude of the parade is bigger than you would expect in most small to medium sized towns round here. It really was something. "

"[The Christmas tree] was a huge symbolic thing."

"For a small village, it was excellent; well organised, well planned and it was a fabulous evening."

"Grateful for such for such events being provided in our local community."

One stakeholder questioned the focus during this project on the light parades and cyanotype installations in Eldon & Dene Valley, which was a shift from more continuous but low visibility activities in previous years. They felt there should have been more activities through the year, for continuity, however this was not raised by anyone else interviewed.



Capacity to develop and deliver creative activities.

As well as delivering creative activities and improving access during the project, Turning the Hourglass aimed to increase capacity within communities to develop and run creative activities themselves.

Witton Park

Northern Heartlands initially worked with the Village Hall to understand the organising group's concerns and barriers they faced. As the project progressed, Northern Heartlands also held activities in the Methodist chapel and at outdoor locations around the village, attempting to identify and support residents who might be interested in organising creative activities. Several people interviewed were newly involved in organising events in the village and were taking part following interactions with the Project Development Manager.

Interviewees from Witton Park spoke about issues that are common to many community groups, including problems recruiting volunteers, an aging cohort of existing volunteers and perceived lack of interest from the community. They were broadly positive about Northern Heartlands' involvement and use of the venue: "*[the activities] attract people who possibly wouldn't normally come through the door*" and "*it's nice to see the village hall being used aside from the normal classes*". One of the interviewees also felt that Northern Heartlands had a positive influence on residents' openness to trying new things. On the other hand, an interviewee felt that the iterative process of co-developing activities was slow: "*we talk about [a creative idea] quite far in advance then nothing seems to happen for a while... there's a delay.*"

By the end of the two-year period, the Northern Heartlands team had not identified any individuals from Witton Park interested in leading creative activities for the village, whether from existing community groups or participants in activities. Staff felt that this step can't be pushed: "*the key thing [is] having a person [who is] ready to get involved.*" They also felt that two years was only really enough time to start building relationships and interest, that the craft activities were a good basis for a group to emerge but that longer time was needed. This view was echoed in comments by interviewees from Eldon & Dene Valley, who



commented that the three years of activity prior to Turning the Hourglass had been essential for the levels of community engagement with the winter light parades.

Northern Heartlands' provided support for a community-led mural project, developed from discussions in a local Rainbows, Brownies and Guides group about what they thought might improve the appearance of the park. One of the interviewees explained that: *"I remembered [Northern Heartlands] had done other things down here...so I thought, oh they might be interested in making that happen."* They added that they hadn't expected the level of support they received: *"I thought they would just point me to who could be the funders"* and *"it was their suggestion to use this as seed funding [to get additional funds]."* The designs were created with children and installed by a local artist. As a result, residents unconnected with creating the murals tidied up nearby seating areas, and the organisers plan to apply for further funding.

Eldon & Dene Valley

Capacity building was intended to build on previous activity in the community, with a step change in visibility to increase wider impact, in line with Northern Heartlands' theory of practice. Conversations with residents led to the concept of a winter light parade, Christmas tree and Santa's grotto in December 2021, and all interviewees praised this, with one resident commenting:

"on the night, I think most people found it absolutely incredible that this beautiful parade had been organised where all their children are involved, where the parents came along and they were able to have a warm snack and a warm drink together and people loved it. And the response from that was that more people got together and were saying, well, we need to do this more often, we need to have more of these things."

A local stakeholder also commented that:

"one of the strengths of both of the winter light parades is that [Northern Heartlands] did work through local people and through some of the local charity infrastructure... all credit to them for being persistent with that, because it would have been so much easier to buy it in from somewhere else."

As a result of the 2021 light parade, a new community group formed in January 2022 and Northern Heartlands worked with both the new and existing community groups to build skills around fundraising, council permissions and event management to deliver another light parade, workshops and Christmas tree in 2022. In one case, a group of interested residents learned lantern making from the artist in order to be able to run workshops themselves in future. In November 2022, one of the residents described this process¹⁷:

¹⁷ Northern Heartlands video about the second winter light parade: <https://youtu.be/ukDZ221z7t4>

"They're teaching us step by step what we can do to achieve things easily... it's kind of watch and learn and pick up things as you go along the way... we had Northern Heartlands last year, and this year we've partnered up with them, so next year, hopefully, we'll have everything in place to be able to do this without Northern Heartlands."

Another interviewed resident said that Northern Heartlands *"have been fantastic in the support they have given us, whether that's just... contact lists, who's the right person to contact in the Council to deal with litter picking... They've directed me to the right people to talk to, and all of these connections are really helping."*



At the beginning of 2023, Northern Heartlands were in talks with the new community group about business plans and developing legal structures. Unfortunately, the group disbanded in March 2023; because I have not been able to speak to anyone from the group about this, any discussion about why this occurred would be speculation. What it demonstrates is the complexity of creative practice with communities under pressure. The process of capacity building is non-linear and cannot be assigned to a set time frame because setbacks are as likely as progression. As one staff member commented: *"working with communities you just have to expect the unexpected"*.

An evaluation report is a snapshot. Had this report been written in January 2022, the process of capacity building in Eldon and Dene Valley would have appeared to be hugely successful, but community arts practice is often about persistence in the face of setbacks, and Northern Heartlands was commended for this by an interviewee from Witton Park:

"To be fair, if I'd been Northern Heartlands...I'd have given up and walked away, I would have said...I'll go and work with another village that's more receptive. But they haven't - they've kept adapting and changing and listening, and I think they're getting there."

Capacity building can be difficult to evaluate because it is often intangible, a change in mindset which can lead to outcomes well after the project end. This evaluation didn't have

resources to conduct community wide research, but one of the interviewees from Eldon & Dene Valley described how they perceived the impact of Northern Heartlands' involvement:

"If an outside person comes in and says, well, actually we can do this, we can achieve these things, that's what Northern Heartlands has done for this community. They've said, we believe that you can do this and we want to help you... we're going to give you a step on the ladder. And that step on the ladder is not just to one person, they have given that step up to dozens of us who now have it fixed in our mind; we can do more."

Shared understanding

Northern Heartlands has taken a learning approach, both in reflection on their own activities and learning from other organisations. The speaker and discussion event in May 2023 had contributions from [On Our Radar](#), Durham County Council's Head of Culture who shared information about 'Place Labs' – a key project in the City of Culture Bid - and from the CEO of [The Auckland Project](#)



who spoke of his previous experience of community involvement in the development of the Shakespeare North Playhouse in Prescot. The theme of the event was billed as 'Creativity and a Place-based approach to Community Empowerment' and promised "an afternoon of lively debate, conversation, stories and discussions on the role that arts, culture, creativity and heritage can play in inspiring communities". Local community artists led a workshop and one of the discussion groups, and attendees included representatives from Durham University, Arts Council England, North Pennines AONB, East Durham Creates, Eden Arts, Darlington Borough Council, Bishop Auckland Town Council, local arts and community organisations, freelance artists and community members. Rolling discussion groups considered place-based working, practicalities and barriers to creative practice with communities, engaging with decision-makers and a creative activity with free discussion.

Although there were a few minor issues with timings of workshops and discussion groups, feedback from attendees was very positive in terms of sharing understanding:

The line-up showed a real breadth of perspective around a theme.

Turning the Hourglass proved yet again the capabilities of Northern Heartlands in creating such a convivial atmosphere with such a vast array of expertise & depth of talent in one space.

We are a [Creative People and Places Programme] and we tend to be more community focussed sometimes, and it can be easy to forget that freelancers and artists are part of the community as well - the event was really good for reminding us of that!

I was impressed by the range of participants, which made for lively and constructive conversations. It was not just the range of roles represented - community members, artists, organisers and organisations - it was also the geographic [spread].

This evaluation report also contributes to the Shared Understanding outcome by including a discussion about community-led creative practice based on the views and experiences of people involved in Turning the Hourglass.

Legacy & Finance

Turning the Hourglass leaves a physical legacy in both communities, with the mural at Witton Park and the cyanotype hoardings on the Mission Hall in Eldon. In both communities, people experienced delivering events for their community, many for the first time. In Eldon & Dene Valley, residents were supported to learn the skills required for delivering the light parade, including practical parade making skills, administration and financial management, and fundraising, all of which are relevant to other community events. Residents were also supported to understand the permissions and processes for acquiring and installing a community Christmas tree. The second light parade was a development opportunity for the artists who led it, supporting them in their ambition to set up a carnival arts organisation for County Durham.

There has been a pause in activities due to the end of funding and some restructuring in Northern Heartlands. However, planning is underway to restart activities and continue capacity in both communities as soon as possible. The profile generated by Turning the Hourglass, particularly the first light parade, has contributed to Northern Heartlands' own development, and the



Cyanotope panels installed on the Mission Hall, Eldon

'connecting communities' strand of their revised 3-year business model is heavily informed by work undertaken with the communities of Witton Park and Eldon & Dene Valley.

Northern Heartlands were successful in using the Paul Hamlyn Foundation grant to leverage additional funding for delivery, raising £43,000 from Arts Council England and Durham County Council. During the project, Northern Heartlands was awarded National Portfolio Organisation status by Arts Council England, which will allow for continued activity in both communities. As a result of NPO status, Northern Heartlands is reviewing strategy and structure, so final decisions about the work in each community is not available at the time of writing.

4. Discussion: community arts in practice



This section brings together understandings and experiences of people involved in Turning the Hourglass as practitioners and residents. It attempts to summarise their views about increasing arts access, participation and capacity in communities experiencing multiple forms of deprivation. Far more was said than can be included in this report, so this only scratches the surface of a larger conversation.

Listening as a practice.

Interviewees agreed that listening is a requirement throughout the process of working with communities. Staff and practitioners commented that listening is essential but also time consuming, involves practical difficulties and a recognition that understanding will always be partial.

"you need to go in and have conversations with people. The difficulty is getting people interested enough to come and have a conversation".

Northern Heartlands staff explained that one approach is to regularly go to social hubs, such as a cafe or working men's club, and slowly build trust by listening and talking to people. However, when a community doesn't have such hubs then this is much more difficult: *"it's really hard to engage communities that don't have [any community venues]... How do you even get in touch with them?"* In the case of existing activity groups, a difficulty can be that people are there to do their activity, not talk. So, without a social hub, the first steps of engagement can *"be really slow burn."*

A creative practitioner commented that providing creative activities can create new spaces for listening and conversation: *"if you get them to do something creative, it kind of breaks down all the barriers and so folks start chatting away."* A stakeholder suggested that *"from those creative skills, [people] talk to each other. When they're talking to each other, they're*

communicating to each other, then when they're communicating, they start to work with each other." On the other hand, staff noted that simply providing the activity was not enough: *"if you want people to turn up to something you have to put the work in beforehand,"* but they agreed that *"during those activities I can start conversations."*

One creative practitioner described their practice as working towards an 'invitation' from residents:

"It's about being an outsider and playing the role of the outsider; I don't try and claim that I'm embedded... [my practice is] that is I am... the person who's not from there, who hopefully, though, isn't... coming in to exploit, who isn't coming in to take away anything, or use anyone there in any way. I'm coming in to talk to them and see what's going on, and from those conversations maybe be invite to help them do something about whatever it is that they feel they need to happen."

Northern Heartlands staff are conscious of this outsider status, even as a local organisation and themselves residents of the area. They purposefully aimed to establish their neutrality and lack of agenda, and they wanted residents to see Northern Heartlands as *"not the local authority, not the police, not official; they just want to help."* The benefits of outsider status were also felt by residents, with one saying *"it breaks the stigma [of existing groupings]."*

The limits of understanding.

Listening and understanding was emphasised as the act of trying to *"get under the skin of... people and the place, and what's happened to it, and long standing divisions and feuds, or things that have happened that you can't ever know about but inform how people think."* At the same time, practitioners recognised that even further into working a community *"you don't know what's really going on."* In addition, there is a power relationship between the creative practitioners, arts organisations and residents which may lead to self-censorship. Northern Heartlands staff described feeling that people were sometimes reluctant to criticise because they were *"primed not to"* by other residents who didn't want them *"to complain or look a gift horse in the mouth."*

Staff, practitioners and residents were keenly aware that every community has factions and tensions, however small the parish or village, and that in any place there are *"pockets of different communities"*. One resident perceived such deep tensions between groups in their community that *"I almost wish someone would come in and do mediation."* Northern Heartlands



Northern Heartlands Director reading to children during community creative workshop

staff noted that *"what I try to do is listen, but to a certain point I have to ignore it; I understand what the tensions are then try and work between them."* A creative practitioner described this as:

"you need to understand. Whether you actually come from that community...or you've really, really spent time working with that community and... you totally get how things are in these places... I think if you don't do either of those two things, then you're going to struggle."

Understanding is also about recognising there will be contradictions and different points of view within a community. One stakeholder described pockets of communities as completely disengaged from structures of authority, yet a resident described this more as self-reliance:

"most people are in some way connected to, not just their neighbours, but the families have a history with each other and I think it's that basis, compounded with poverty, which has made... the people who have nothing more likely to share within our community."

Trust

Allied to listening and understanding, interviewees agreed that trust is foundational because of the history and experience of the communities in this project. A stakeholder observed that for *"many, many reasons, [residents] are very reluctant to engage with external voices [so] you've got a duty of care to the people who you're working with"*.

One of the creative practitioners framed this as mistrust, distrust and trust:

"often in these situations, what you find is the authorities in all their forms... mistrust the people there... because [the authorities] falsely believe... they will cause trouble, that they won't get involved, they won't do things in a manner that's consistent with the expectations of authority."

"In return, the communities normally distrust the authorities... that they do things to them at best, or nothing at all, and the evidence for that is clear because they have nothing."

"So the answer to those both... the distrust and the mistrust, is trust, and that applies to me as well... It's about me building [residents'] trust and it's about me trying to help them re-find some trust in those people who may mistrust them and not fairly invest in them, in all the ways that might be."

It was clear from talking to interviewees that trust must be genuinely, and repeatedly, given by practitioners before it can be earned. An example was the Christmas tree in Eldon & Dene Valley. A stakeholder pointed out that *"the location of the Christmas tree is really central to where a lot of the antisocial behaviour occurs"* and interviewees spoke of expectations both inside and outside the community that it would be vandalised, and that it was a risk to the

project to place it there. The tree wasn't damaged either year, validating the trust given. A stakeholder suggested the tree made two statements to young people involved in antisocial behaviour, that *"we're making this space a nice thing. Or, on the other hand...you deserve a Christmas tree just as much as anybody else."* A creative practitioner commented that *"trust is a complicated thing, and it means going outside of conventional approaches to processes, and what might be seen as risks."*

Continuity is part of trust. One stakeholder spoke of other organisations disappearing after a few sessions, another commented that *"because the communities are so not trusting of external people, it's important and right...that Northern Heartlands came back again to do some more work, and that's the only way you're ever going to gain that trust."* One resident described Northern Heartlands as *"the ones who haven't given up."*

Creative ambition.

Community arts practice needs to balance the vision and ambition of creative practitioners with the culture and interests of the community. Northern Heartlands described a simple aim of *"getting a critical mass of people who are just having a nice time and have access to really good quality arts"*, but they recognised it isn't that straightforward.

An experienced practitioner commented that creative practitioners can *"do a good job, but nonetheless [not be] accepted by the community, and have in some cases upset or confused the community a little bit."* They added that *"Northern Heartlands are quite unusual because in many cases arts organisations don't match up the right people and either they're gonna have pretty neutral or sometimes exceptionally negative results."* One of the staff pointed out that residents may feel intimidated by creative practitioners and so will go along with the artist's vision rather than voicing their own, which can require mediation and may not even be apparent to less experienced creative practitioners. A creative practitioner described this as *"I will try and help people push themselves as far as they want - they want, not what I want."*

Creative scale was another point of discussion. Northern Heartlands' staff pointed out that they don't necessarily want to start too big with a community event, because that doesn't leave space for it to grow, but at the same time they want it to be genuinely inspiring with as much involvement as possible. Striking this balance isn't always easy to judge. In the case of the first Halloween performance in Witton Park, staff questioned whether it had been too



Christmas Tree, Dene Valley & Eldon

ambitious, *"to a point where I don't think anyone was thinking I'd like to get involved with that and do that next year... we created something that whilst people think it's great, it's not necessarily something they can do for themselves."*



Outdoor Halloween performance, Witton Park

On the other hand, a local creative practitioner praised Northern Heartlands for *"not [being] afraid to have a go at different things, things that may not work, things that are off beat"*. They singled out the Halloween

performance for stimulating interest and felt that Northern Heartlands *"are good at making people feel curious"*. There was no clear conclusion to this from any of the interviewees, but a stakeholder commented that the scale of the light parades was *"a really good thing because it was another way of telling the community, why shouldn't you have these things...that message that you are worth making a fuss of."*

Turning the Hourglass

One aim of the Paul Hamlyn Arts Access and Participation Fund is that *"communities are empowered to make decisions about their cultural lives and able to access the resources and partnerships they need to pursue these ambitions"*. In this project, that aim sits within the context of communities where people experience all the many difficulties and stresses that come with poverty, isolation, the impact of covid, the cost-of-living crisis and lack of services. One resident pointed out that activities must be free because residents can't afford to make even the smallest financial contribution:

"experiences, even for smaller things... like going to the cinema or going for a day at the seaside, some of these are out of the financial pocket of families here".

"one of the big incentives for everybody to come to anything... is actually to provide meals... the families who are really economically challenged, for them that's a little bit of peace of mind."

This alone creates a huge barrier to communities' creative ambitions, but it also raised questions for some interviewees about the priorities of funding:

"[Northern Heartlands'] work is absolutely essential, but what we don't want it to do is to cover over the cracks... so the authorities can say, well, look what we're doing but in actual fact it's like putting a piece of makeup on."

Or, put another way:

“anything that comes into this village that raises peoples quality of life and maybe a move in aspiration is fabulous... but my only question is, would I have spent that £10,000 worth of grants in that direction?”

Of course, grants can only be spent within funders’ parameters, but a stakeholder also commented that *“There is a gap between what the funders perceive are the issues and what we know are the issues... and they're trying to push down their ideas onto ground base.”*

This was mirrored by comments from some of the local creative practitioners at the speaker and discussion event, talking about the requirement to meet the aims of funders in order to pursue their practice:

“There’s a general sense of exhaustion [among artists]... how long can I keep fighting for this?”

“I get bored of all the policies I have to read. I’m an artist and all I do is try to understand how to make the argument to [funders].”

“What we have is artists facilitating social provision.”

One of the creative practitioners pointed out that residents are also aware of their place in this funding hierarchy:

“They've said to me ‘we're not daft and sometimes we feel like we're like the poster children for the poor of Durham’. And I was like, ‘well you sort of are, to be fair? But remember what the rules are’, and they’re like ‘we're gonna make sure we can get as much out as possible, for us in our community’. And I’m like, ‘exactly, that's the number one rule. Play the game and remind them that you have played the game and in return... now can we have that investment in the youth club please?’”



Despite organisations, creative practitioners and communities being very aware of funding constraints and contradictions, they still believe in community creative practice as a vehicle for genuine change:

“Creativity is tool for social impact, however disguised it is... it's always going to be a byproduct of being involved in some participatory creative practice because it makes you feel better about yourself, your place.”

“The work we do changes lives.”

A county councillor at the speaker and discussion event commented that the importance of the light parades was being *“something that you can take people to and say ‘look at this, don’t tell me these people don’t deserve a better quality of life’”*.

Similarly, one of the practitioners described this as key to their practice:

“On the one hand, [the arts] help people express themselves and be creative, and find a pride in their local community and see things up there. But on the other it's to effectively sell their right to be more involved in decision making in their communities because... art sells... And if you make art that's about ... people empowering themselves and doing things in their communities, as art, and [influential] people back that, then that's a powerful, big push [for the communities to be able to say] ‘that's why you were wrong to try and knock this place down and displace us all... and now we want you to invest more and look at all the beautiful things we've done.’”



5. Conclusion

Northern Heartlands clearly met four of the outcomes in the framework developed for this evaluation:

- residents of both Witton Park and Eldon & Dene Valley saw a substantial increase in access to creative activities and events during the project period. The activities were relevant and meaningful, with a range of positive benefits for individuals and the communities identified by participants and stakeholders.
- Northern Heartlands took a learning approach to their work, using this to inform their own practice and strategy going forward, and sharing their understanding with other organisations and practitioners through the speaker and discussion event.
- Northern Heartlands left a physical legacy in both communities, and interviewees identified changes in skills and mindset among residents, particularly in Eldon & Dene Valley. Northern Heartlands is continuing work in both communities.
- Northern Heartlands raised additional funds of £43,000 from Arts Council England and Durham County Council, which was used to expand and increase the creative activities provided during the project.

Regarding the 'capacity' outcome (groups and individuals are better able to develop and deliver creative activities) the conclusion is more complicated. While Northern Heartlands embedded this outcome within their strategy, and devoted significant effort in practice, the results are unclear at the time of writing. This doesn't mean the project was unsuccessful, rather it reflects the complexity of creative capacity building with communities, especially those already under pressure. Such work takes time - lots of time - and a recognition that it won't be straightforward, linear or even have clear end points. The foundations have been laid in Witton Park, but two years can only be a start. In Eldon & Dene Valley, Northern Heartlands is continuing activity, despite the major setback earlier this year, and now has a strong track record to build on.

A two-year evaluation is not long enough to judge the long-term outcomes of Northern Heartlands' work, or what changes in residents' perception of themselves and their places might lead to in future. However, it is clear that a two-year funding timescale is unrealistic for projects in such complex circumstances, and it is to be hoped that Paul Hamlyn Foundation will recognise this when making decisions about further funding for this work. Northern Heartlands has already established a strong reputation for community-led practice, especially in places facing difficulty. This project has helped to increase Northern Heartlands' expertise and learning, which it is using to inform its own work and also sharing with others across the region.