

# The Value of Shared Space

A report prepared for Northern Heartlands

Dr Paul Cowie, Brad McCormick, Katy Vanden and Chris Ford

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OUR PAST  
OUR FUTURE  
OUR HOME



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## 1. Introduction and overview

This report and research were commissioned by Northern Heartlands<sup>1</sup> as part of their program of work using creative practice to improve the way communities are involved in planning and shaping their future, including through influencing policy. In this project the team was asked to investigate the value of shared space.

The idea of shared space appears straight forward: the public realm beyond the domestic and (most) work places. It's our cultural commons that include clubs, pubs, shops, schools, community centres, town halls, churches, chapels, sports centres, health centres, play centres, care homes, libraries, local newspapers, arts centres, museums, heritage sites, gardens, and parks - and then there is the digital domain. It is where we are both citizens and neighbours; the locations of our associational life and recreation.

Yet there are issues of ownership, of rights and responsibilities, of maintenance and management that are perhaps becoming more contentious, certainly in some respects more pressured. Two specific pressures faced by voluntary and community organizations that hold such shared spaces informed the initiation of the project: people and money.

These spaces are frequently dependent on one or two local residents. Often on a voluntary basis, they cover the territory - cleaning, maintaining, and running the building – providing an infrastructure so enabling others to organize and enjoy activities within the space. They are also often part of the management committee, with the inevitable ongoing fundraising. Reflecting our aging population, there is perhaps a quiet crisis, difficult to see because of its dispersed and slowly emerging nature.

And then there is the money. The continuous pressures on public expenditure since the 2008 financial crisis impact on shared spaces in many ways. Community centres and other shared spaces are increasingly becoming the locations for the delivery of public services. The unit costs of such service delivery is constantly being pushed down. Where there might have been an element of rent included in the past under full cost recovery, there is now a pressure for that cost to be covered elsewhere – from charitable trusts to coffee mornings. Somewhere this 'buck passing' starts breaking down, our shared spaces become less viable and perhaps our cultural commons face a tragedy.

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<sup>1</sup> Northern Heartlands is a Heritage Lottery Funder project whose mission is to deliver cultural activities that transform people's understanding of the heritage, landscapes and places they live in, building their confidence and ability to influence policy and decision-making. <https://northernheartlands.org/about-us/>

There were two thoughts behind the project – one human and one technical. If we could attract key local activists to think together in a fresh way about their shared spaces, exploring the community's common wealth, we might help move these local conversations on. If in doing this we could generate an evidence base for use in public sector procurement we could support one approach to future financial viability.

The procurement issue hinges on the potential use of the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012.<sup>2</sup> One argument around the opportunities the Act presents – perhaps particularly post-Brexit – goes like this. There is no settled understanding of what 'social value' means but it is by definition what happens between two or more people. This interaction happens in spaces/places which are shared between those people. These spaces/places are necessary for those interactions. Buying social value requires that these spaces/places to be paid for. Slowed down, and addressing lots of technical matters, such lines of thought may help fund shared spaces in the future. However such debates need to be grounded in what people see as the value of shared space.

*In the next section of the report we outline the process by which the communities were identified and the process of engagement initiated.*

## 2. Identifying and engaging communities

With the limited resources available for the work, the project became focused on testing the concept and approach in two locations rather than generating a substantive body of evidence. These locations were identified with the funder who led on participant recruitment.

Informal conversations with residents in these locations during the development stage were broadly supportive of the approach with the following issues being noted:

- “We need to have these discussions; external facilitation is needed.”
- Who you get attending is crucial. The risk of approaching (e.g.) the community centre is you get the 'community centre crew'.
- There is a history to most of these conversations.
- “For this to be valuable locally need some resources/support for next steps.”

The work in one village did not progress. Although an initial discussion with some key local residents suggested the potential to develop the initiative: “after seemingly getting certain members of the

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<sup>2</sup> The document at this link provides one of many useful introductions: <https://www.socialenterprise.org.uk/policy-and-research-reports/front-and-centre-putting-social-value-at-the-heart-of-inclusive-growth/>

community outside it came down to difficulty getting the hall booked. I wonder if there was a bit of 'gatekeeping' going on." Pressure on project timing and limited appetite amongst residents in the 'substitute' location led to the project work being restructured into one workshop.

The full model was run in the third location. Significant promotional work, drawing on the knowledge and contacts of a key local activist, was undertaken to stimulate interest and recruit an audience. Personal invitations were supplemented by broader publicity circulated through local shared spaces along with an article in the local press.

### 3. Theatre as method for community engagement

To reflect on the use of the Town Meeting in this project on the value of shared space is necessary to give a little context to the development of the Town Meeting Workshop method. This section outlines the development of the method to allow some context for its use in the current project. This context helps when we reflect on the two workshops outlined later as this was the first time the method has been used outside its original domain of neighbourhood planning.

The Town Meeting project first started as a research tool to investigate how communities engaged with neighbourhood planning. In particular how community groups selected representatives from their community to represent it in the planning process. The initial phase of the project created a theatrical performance that asked audiences to play the role of a community facing a major planning decision and provoked them into thinking about the consequences of that decision. The Town Meeting sees the audience cast as residents of a fictional town that is in crisis. Assisted only by shambolic, but well meaning, planner Benjamin Rennold (played by actor Brad McCormick) the audience must make the biggest decision in the town's history and fight for its survival.

The play was developed to ensure communities were given a framework in which to debate and explore issues of legitimacy and representation. We were pleasantly surprised when we discovered the theatre format worked very well in engaging a diverse audience in these complex debates who even seemed to enjoy the experience. At this point the play was both an entertainment experience and research tool which mainly benefited the team behind the project rather than the communities participating in the process.

We then considered whether a version of the play could be turned into a workshop or something similar to actually assist communities in the process of developing a neighbourhood plan. The development of

the workshop method was described in a case study produced by Cap-a-Pie which can be found here: <https://bit.ly/2yyyAfM>

This version of the play/method was focused on very similar themes to the original play. It aimed to help communities think about the priorities within the community. About who should be involved in the planning process and the nature of planning as a statutory undertaking. The workshop method has worked very well with the groups that have used it. In fact, the report created as an output of the workshop held with the community in Startforth, Co. Durham now forms part of the evidence base for their neighbourhood plan (<https://bit.ly/2KugDle>)

This evolution of the project, in hindsight, was a logical progression. The themes explored in the play were the same as the themes explored in the workshop. In engaging the community the format was to perform the play one weekend and deliver the workshop the weekend after. The idea was to stimulate interest and enthusiasm in what can be, let's face it, a pretty dry and uninteresting subject. This works well for neighbourhood planning. The play, by accident rather than deliberate design, tends to stir passions and get people worked up about community planning. It does this by highlighting what could happen when power to plan is taken away from a community. This energy is then hopefully channelled into a practical activity of making a start on the planning process.

In January 2018 Northern Heartlands<sup>3</sup> invited us to the village of Startforth in Teesdale to perform 'The Town Meeting' one day and on another day run a workshop around planning, community and place. Startforth were on the cusp of developing their Neighbourhood Plan – a potentially daunting and time-consuming process with real-world consequences for the village. This situation is not too far removed from the fictional scenario set out in the play for Little Rikjord. The hope was that this two-pronged approach would allow the community to look at the creation of the Plan more holistically and creatively.

### **Shared Space**

Northern Heartlands then introduced Cap-a-Pie and Paul Cowie to Chris Ford. Chris was interested in using the format of The Town Meeting – Workshop to find out if and why shared space was valuable for communities. Working with Chris we devised a new workshop which would ask members of a community to consider the shared space in their community, articulate why they valued it, and consider how these spaces might be safeguarded and sustained for the future.

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<sup>3</sup> one of 16 Great Place Schemes running across England with funding from HLF & ACE whose aim is to put arts and culture at the heart of their communities

Some adaptations inevitably have had to be made between the play and the workshop. The first, and biggest, change is in the scenario. In the play the action takes place in a fictional town and involves a significant event, the destruction of the town to allow the expansion of a mine. This is deliberately dramatic so as to animate the play but is a bit too far from most community's reality to work in the workshop. For the workshop a more realistic scenario was created, something that was likely to happen in real life. However, this scenario was still related to a significant planning issue that would have a non-trivial impact on the community.

If the show is about provoking people to respond to an extreme and high stakes scenario and almost inviting emotions to run high, then the workshop is about people responding in a more considered way to something smaller that could legitimately affect them at a local level. Although we know that the show is an effective way to conduct research, we created it as a piece of entertainment, something that could be programmed in venues around the country as a stand-alone piece of theatre. To that end, when working with a community that will also participate in a workshop, the show is a way for participants to meet and interact with each other in a safe environment, to hopefully laugh and enjoy themselves and perhaps as a by-product to think about wider planning issues. We are at pains to stress during the show that we are in a fictional town and that what is happening is not real - that is, this town is like your town but it is not your town and the more you lean into that fiction the better we feel the experience will be. Furthermore, we don't wish for the show to be a place for participants to hash out planning grievances or explore local politics.

To an extent, that is what the workshop is for.

However, we endeavour to deliver the workshop in a way where local issues can be explored but safely and in a non-combative manner. Once again we use fiction to help this process. Participants are still able to use their local expertise and hold onto what is important to them but through the prism of an imagined scenario. The actor who was a character in the show is now themselves, facilitating the workshop and very open about the fact that they and the group are applying a 'what if' situation to a real place.

The challenge in creating another fictional scenario for the workshops is finding one that fits two criteria:

a) something could conceivably happen to the town - a situation that is too far removed from possibility could potentially alienate some participants

b) something that walks the tightrope between not too controversial but ultimately still interesting. A workable fiction is something we want people to be excited by but that doesn't stray too close to any fault lines in the community.

In the workshop itself, local knowledge is important. The exercises are designed so that participants can, in effect, educate the facilitator about where they live which in turn can reveal what they hold dear.

For the workshop in Startforth these revelations had a clear tie to the impending task of devising a neighbourhood plan. For Stanhope, the surplus of shared space was a clear issue with no discernible solution and while the workshop refocused thoughts on the issue, it was difficult to see a tangible future output in relation to it. Although there was a suggestion that Stanhope may be able to address some of these issues while undertaking the process of creating a neighbourhood plan.

With the current project and the work undertaken with the communities in Stanhope and Witton Park the focus (as discussed in section 4 & 5) was on the value of shared space. This necessitated a rethink in terms of the fictional scenario to stimulate a debate about the nature of shared space and its societal value to the community.

The elements of the workshop were initially the same as for the neighbourhood planning workshop:

- The community starts by drawing their favourite buildings and favourite place in the community;
- The group then moves to the chalk mat to draw the street plan for their community;
- They then place their favourite places on the map where they are in reality;
- There is then a discussion about why people have chosen a particular place as their favourite;
- The fictional scenario is then presented to the group and a debate about its impact takes place;
- They are then split into groups to consider different elements of the socio-economic impact of the changes.

The first three activities, all centred around the visualisation of places of meaning work just as well in this context as they did for developing a sense of place in the neighbourhood planning context. Map making as a way to make sense of the relationship between physical spaces and social relationships is a recognised research field. As Powell (2010) puts it, "Moving beyond the conventional use of maps as a means to mark geographic space and place mean that as an aesthetic device maps afford the

opportunity for depicting multisensory, lived experiences of space, time, and place in nonlinear ways.”  
(p.540)

When we came to the group work to think about the future, we had initially divided the groups into 4 with each group discussing a topic: health, environment, economic & social and community. As the groups started to consider each topic it was clear there was a huge overlap between the topics and to separate them into distinct silos created false barriers. In fact, one of the issues of shared space is its effect on all aspects of the community. The economic aspects of shared space are closely connected to the social aspects of life for example. It was clear therefore that there was a matrix or network of interconnected ties between the shared space such that they could almost be considered an ecosystem. To some extent there is a synergistic relationship between many of the shared spaces: pubs, shops and cafes rely on the influx of tourists which in turn are attracted by the beauty of the natural shared space and the open-air pool.

#### 4. The workshop with the community in Stanhope

It is this lived experience of the value of shared space that we were trying to capture in the map making element of the workshop. With the group in Stanhope this was particularly evident in the outdoor, informal shared spaces that the group identified as being their favourite spaces. Three of the drawings were of open spaces in and around Stanhope: the Stepping Stones, an area locally known as ‘the Roots’ and Ashes Quarry & Crawley Edge. Two buildings were drawn; the Church (St Thomas) and the Primary School. Indeed, the discussion had to be steered somewhat towards the more traditional built shared spaces such as the Town Hall, Church Hall, and other more commercial shared space such as shops and public houses. It seemed the participants of the workshop had a stronger affinity to the open, natural shared spaces within and around the locality rather than the more formal built shared spaces.

Then a discussion of what constituted shared space:

- Things that are symbolic of Stanhope,
- Shared spaces are places where social interactions take place,
- Places you can go without a specific invite,
- A place to do something that may not cost anything or the value of which is more than the actual cost of the activity,
- A place that creates and fosters social interactions,
- A place where no one person is in charge,

There was then a discussion about the nature of shared spaces and the extent of the influence of shared space on things like community cohesion and sustainability. It was pointed out that the shared space in Stanhope had an impact on and acted as a benefit to other communities in the Dale. This even extends to beyond the dale when seasonal visitors are considered. It was noted many of the caravans in the town have been handed down through generations such that the bonds between people visiting span these generations. It was a vital economic service centre, the shops, pubs and bank. These shared spaces also formed part of the social centre. They are places to 'bump into' people and informally socialise. We then filled in the blanks of the missing physical shared space. In the end the list of shared spaces was:

- Stanhope C of E Primary School
- Ashes Quarry & Crawley Edge
- Tree Roots
- St Thomas Church
- Stepping Stones
- Stanhope Sports & Social Club
- The Hub
- Community Centre & Pottery Garage
- Local Shops
- Methodist School Rooms
- The Pool
- Masonic Hall
- Town Hall
- Durham Dales Centre
- Railway Station/Railway
- Football Field
- Showground & Cricket Pitch
- Pubs

Everyone then split into 4 groups with each group considering one of 4 different angles: Health, Environment, Economic and Social benefits of shared space. Not a great response, not clear if people understood what the task involved.

### ***Health***

Focus was on the space to promote healthy activities. The activity is more important than the space and some of the space needs to be bigger. Social isolation, particularly with an aging population, is a particular issue in rural communities. Shared spaces and the events they host are particularly important in trying to combat this.

### ***Environment***

The point was made that multiple buildings are not efficient. Need to duplicate heat and light for each. Stanhope provides access to the rest of the dales. Better environment for people in Stanhope?

It was pointed out that, save for the pool, none of the community buildings had been purpose built or if they had been i.e. the school, they may need to be adapted to suit the changing needs of a modern community.

### ***Economic***

The activities and those undertaking the activities support and in turn are supported by other shared space. It also helps the visitor economy to have a vibrant set of shared spaces. The pool and train were highlighted in this context though the train was felt to be less beneficial than the pool. Visitors on the train tended not to visit the rest of the town. The bank in particular was mentioned several times as a key shared space. Not only was it a place of social interaction in its own right, it was vital to the success of other shared space. It was pointed out many shared spaces operated very much on a cash basis.

### ***Social & Community***

This was seen as the principal benefit from the various shared spaces. Each shared space had its own network of supporters and users. Each had its own niche in the social fabric of Stanhope. For example the pool, church hall and community centre were beneficial for young people. Other events, such as the farmers market and cultural events, were very good at bringing people together from both inside and outside the town.

## 5. [The workshop with the community in Witton Park](#)

As with Stanhope the workshop began with the group drawing the favourite buildings and favourite space in Witton Park. These drawings were then placed on the map of the community drawn by the group. There was a debate about community buildings as the group pointed out the majority of the buildings in Witton Park were houses. Some participants interestingly drew a building which no longer exists, the school. The favourite place was more straightforward, this was the 'ponds' area to the north of the village. This is an areas of brownfield land, once an iron works and one end of the historical Stockton to Darlington railway, that has been turned over to a nature reserve and fishing ponds. Mirroring the feel of the community of Stanhope, it was this area of open land that held the strongest social and cultural value for the group. There was discussion about how it could be improved, the paths made better, you allow more access to a wider range of individuals.

The group then listed all the built shared space they could think of:

- School
- Church [has it just closed down?]
- Chapel
- Football ground
- Community Centre/ Village Hall
- Cemetery: “one of the most beautiful in the world”
- Paradise/Fishpools
- War Memorial

The lack of other types of shared space, particularly spaces such as shops and pubs were discussed with a sense of realism. Many of the group had lived in the village when it still benefited from a shop and pub. There was a realism however that such a small community would always struggle to maintain the viability of such enterprises. There was a discussion about the need for a convenience store which ideally would have a post office. This would particularly benefit those residents who may have difficulty accessing other service centres.

The other discussion was around the location of one particular shared space, the playpark. At the moment it is tucked away on the edge of the village. Given the form of the village, effectively a triangle around the green space in the middle, it was suggested that moving the playpark to the middle would help. It would be overlooked so anti-social behaviour, what there is, would be reduced. Also children could play and be checked on whilst parents are still in their houses.

One use of shared space that was important to Witton Park was the use of the Village Hall for regular bingo nights. It was stated that these are attended by many people from outside the village. This therefore provides a connection beyond the village facilitated by the shared space.

Finally, there was some discussion about improving links to other neighbouring communities as a way of accessing their shared spaces.

In the second part of the workshop the group was asked to consider the fiction that a new development within the community would provide a cash grant to the community. The small groups were asked to pitch ideas about how to spend one off grant of £100k.

The ideas were:

Conservation centre at Paradise - now run as a private enterprise.

Idea 1: Enhance the paths, bridleways – including wheelchair accessible; disabled riding school could use it. An infinity pool. In the idea there's a balance of focus between internal and external interests to village; it's mainly external as it draws more people in. Having more people come to the village could make a stronger case for shop/pub as they are more likely to be financially viable.

Idea 2: Extend village hall – so that a wider range of activity, film club, café? shop? pop up pub? Village hall is more or less self-sufficient. It is used a lot but not by local people.

## 6. Conclusions

Reflecting on the content, and noting the small number of self-selecting participants, it can be concluded that:

- Spaces in communities are used by – and we might assume valued by - more than solely local residents.
- People need reasons, perhaps forms of permission, to access spaces, including public and community spaces.
- There is an ecosystem of spaces. This is true both for those who use such spaces and for those who manage and maintain them.
- The idea of shared spaces made sense: in spite of diverse perspectives and priorities.
- It is people using physical spaces that create the social value.

Reflecting on the processes used by the project, it can be concluded that:

- A key challenge is recruiting participants; in both communities it was crucial to have a local resident who was directly engaged by the project. To get the 'right' people in the conversation requires significant local knowledge and preparatory work.
- There was a need for a lot of facilitation to get the most out of the engagement. The mapping exercise worked very well. The group work had to be adapted to properly encompass the complexity of the issues being discussed. Shared space is very much about the spaces and connections between them. The interesting insights are often related to these links. The method probably needs further development before trying this type of community engagement again.
- To truly get beyond those already engaged in the topic, a much longer period of engagement is probably needed. A one-off intervention is not sufficient to develop the understanding and relationships needed to tackle such a complex issue.

- Participants reported an intrinsic value to engaging in the work, as recorded through the funder's evaluation, as well as a participant's tweet: "great opportunity to think creatively about what we value in our local community".
- Some participants identified the potential value in using such an approach in other localities and/or more specific focuses.
- Specific routes to progress the conversations beyond the engagement work need to be identified in advance.

**References:**

Powell, K., 2010. Making sense of place: Mapping as a multisensory research method. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(7), pp.539-555.