



# SOCIAL ARTS CLUB

## PROJECT REPORT

*"Zines are a vehicle for personal expression, whether they contain just your own words or images or are the result of a collaborative effort."*



# SOCIAL ARTS CLUB KINGS HEATH CALLING

## PROJECT REPORT

Social Art Club: Kings Heath Calling is an art project which aims to stimulate public engagement and increase participation in community decision-making and local politics in Northampton. The project focused on creating zines with residents and community in Kings Heath in a series of workshops. It has evolved through an ongoing relationship between the artist researchers, the local community and specifically with the Community Safety and Engagement Team, West Northamptonshire Council.

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## PROJECT BACKGROUND

**The Kings Heath Calling project** was designed to encourage and enable residents to tell their personal stories of the area and create a sense of community within Kings Heath. Through creative workshops focusing on zine making, residents have been able to explore their lived experience and the future needs of the community.

Kings Heath Calling builds on issues identified in the 2023 Arts & Humanities Research Council funded Well Communities Research Consortium (WCRC). Over 9 months during 2023, the research consortium led a series of community meetings, in which residents, the community development team and health and social care workers from the local council and from the integrated care partnership aimed to identify community assets and service provision that would improve the delivery of health and social care, reducing disparities in the area. This was deemed a priority because Kings Heath, a housing estate built in the 1950's, has lost most of its community facilities and resources, with few opportunities for social and cultural events, and has recently been designated a Pocket of Deprivation (PoD). From this programme of engagement, it was clear that residents desired opportunities and activities that generated a sense of togetherness and pride in the neighbourhood.

A zine is a small-circulation self-published work of text and images, usually reproduced using a photocopy machine. This medium of making is an accessible, engaging and fast way to create pieces of art that can be exhibited and shared easily. The zine is also historically a medium through which to share political and social manifestos, desires and intentions; it was therefore considered a format through which participants could speak their minds.

**Alongside the zine workshops, the project has exhibited the final art works and will host a legacy event, sharing the process and opportunities from the project with other community development teams and healthcare workers, to encourage creative and collaborative projects to be funded.**



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## PROJECT AIMS

Kings Heath Calling aimed to create art projects that stimulate public engagement and increase participation in community decision-making and local politics.

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## PROJECT TEAM

Artists Andy Hewitt and Mel Jordan,  
Partisan Social Club

Designer Michael Wright

Research Assistant – Polly Jarman

Community Development team –  
Hayley Cannon, Anna Thorpe and  
Carolyn Howe

Local Area Partnership members

Kings Heath Primary Academy

Free 2 Talk youth club

Allotment stakeholders

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## PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The project had seven main objectives:

- To build on existing relationships and develop a pilot art project
  - To identify opportunities and challenges, as well as potential facilities, resources, and individuals
  - To collaborate with the community development team to explore methods to engage diverse resident groups
  - To test media and communication methods at the community level through a pilot art project
  - To display the outcomes to the public in Northampton
  - To create a project report that includes an evaluation and recommendations
  - To organise a legacy event to share project findings and feedback
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## PROJECT FUNDING

The project was funded by the University of Northampton Public, Community, Engagement and Participatory Research Fund 2023, from Higher Education Innovation Funding (HEIF). This was a combination of direct costs and researcher time in kind to the value of £9,211. In addition to this, West Northamptonshire Council contributed £2,000 in direct costs. Coventry University provided in kind contribution for researcher time of £2,600. Middlesex University further contributed in kind researcher time of £2,600. In total, the project worth was £16,411.

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## PROJECT OVERVIEW

Between May and July 2024, 60 residents of Kings Heath participated in zine making workshops with Andy Hewitt, Mel Jordan (Partisan Social Club) working in collaboration with designer Michael Wright, together as the 'Social Art Club'.

Working with newspapers, magazines, a photocopier, scissors and paints, participants from the local youth club, resident coffee mornings, the local walking group and Kings Heath primary school, created small personal zines, sharing their stories of living in Kings Heath and declaring what they value in the area and where they would like to see change.

The material outcomes were exhibited at the Grosvenor Centre in central Northampton on Saturday 6th July. The Social Art Club artist researchers created a mobile stall to display the artworks and hosted a further zine making workshop during the exhibition. A legacy event will be held during the autumn of 2024, for invited participants from the local area partnerships, including community development partners. The aim of this event is to learn about the project development and delivery and to discuss approaches to future funding for creative projects. This event is intended to provide information and guidance for developing creative collaborations and designing funding proposals.

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## PROJECT METHODS

Informed by the histories and practices of arts-based research, which aim to create spaces for critical citizenship and collective agency using creative methods and media, the project focused on creative and practical zine workshops that could be completed by individual participants.

In the development of the programme of workshops, the team used their existing contacts from the WCRC project to meet with youth workers, community partnership leaders, schoolteachers and residents to organise sessions in various locations around Kings Heath. This included in Free2Talk, the local youth club, at the local primary school and collaborating with the community development worker to link into existing coffee mornings and local walking groups. The team also attended the August Fun Day in Kings Heath, a popular social activity attracting a large number of community members. Flyers and posters were created by Social Art Club and distributed locally in the lead up to the event. By connecting with existing groups, such as the school, the weekly youth club and the walking group, reaching residents was streamlined with existing activities.

The team created a workshop kit, including aprons with logos and painted display boards. By creating a mobile format for the zine workshop, that could be set up in a variety of locations, including outdoors and in temporary spaces, the workshops were easy to identify, easy to set up and adaptable for various events. The model of the workshop, which was informal and drop-in, allowed for the team or artist researchers to support participants in experimentation, while also prompting critical thinking, discussions and conversations about their local stories.

During the workshops, participants were encouraged to explore their personal experiences of living in Kings Heath and their future hopes for the community. They were asked prompts such as 'what would you like to see in Kings Heath' and 'what would you like to change'. Participants created short narrative works using text and images. Materials including newspapers, magazines, pens, tape, rollers, stencils, paints and a photocopier enabled people to experiment and play with their stories. Photocopies of photographs taken of the local area were also introduced to the workshops as prompts to edit, adapt and draw on. The zines were then photocopied to become part of a public display on a specially designed zine-kiosk structure. This was exhibited at the Grosvenor Centre in July.



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## PROJECT EVALUATION

Evaluation of this project was carried out in two ways – a participant evaluation form and in depth interviews with key stakeholders. The evaluation forms were separated for 8–12-year-olds and 13+ year olds. Questions included asking about their preferred materials and processes as well as asking how the workshops made participants feel and what they learnt from their involvement. The questions ensured that information could be gathered regarding both the material processes, the creativity of the activity and about whether the workshops encouraged participants to think more about local histories, the local area and their neighbours.

A second process for evaluation was the in-depth interviews with key stakeholders - one with Carolyn Howe, West Northamptonshire Council community development team leader and funding partner of the project, the other with Andy Hewitt, Mel Jordan and Michael Wright, the three delivering researchers. This open-ended conversation covered topics such as what went well, any challenges within the project, key learning and future ideas and developments.

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### Project Outputs

Number of participants - 65

Number of workshops - 9

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### Project insights from participant feedback forms

The following information has been extracted from the completed participant feedback forms.

We developed and designed an evaluation sheet for the project. This was inspired by researching existing forms that have been developed by arts organisations. Carolyn Howe has adopted the form for working on other community projects organised by the Community development team

In total 22 participants completed evaluation forms after the zine making workshops. Of these evaluations, 18 were completed by children aged 8-12, 3 by young people aged 13-18 and two by adults. Most of these participants lived in Kings Heath (16 in total) while the remaining 6 lived in wider Northampton. It is worth noting that children participants completed a different evaluation form from those 13 and over and therefore we only have demographic and protected characteristic information for those over 13. All five respondents over 13 were not disabled. Three identified as female and 2 as male and four considered themselves white or British.

Taking all 22 respondents' answers, when asked what materials they most enjoyed with, the majority stated they enjoyed drawing (14) and painting (10). This number is higher than the total participants because some gave multiple answers.

The most popular answers to how the workshops made participants feel were 'creative' (16), 'arty' (15), 'happy' (9), 'free' (9), 'inspired' (7), 'included' (6), 'chatty' (6), 'connected with Kings Heath' (6) and 'more confident' (4). Two people felt 'challenged' by the workshop while other responses included 'awkward' (1) and 'lonely' (1).

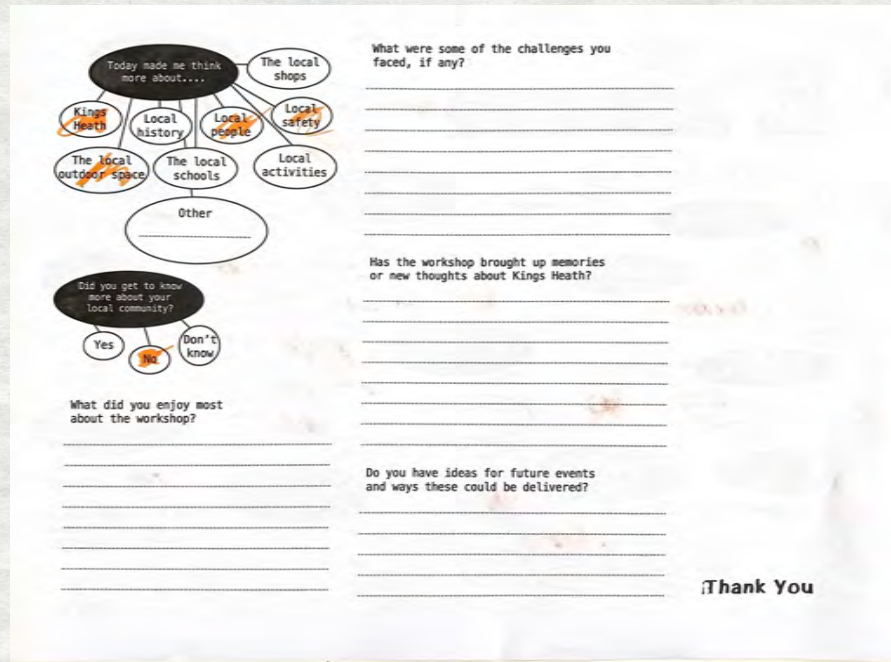
Thirteen participants stated they thought the workshop was 'fun', while an equal number of people said they 'enjoyed the workshop'. Four chose to comment that they thought that the workshops were 'amazing'. Three people thought 'it was hard to start but it got easier' and one person said, 'it was ok'.

When asked what they would tell people about the workshops, comments included 'I will recommend it', 'this made me feel amazed', 'you should check out this cool workshop', 'it was very fun and I enjoyed it' and 'it was so fun and you should go'. Adult respondents included 'it's a good way to try something new' and 'they are brilliant for kids to feel part of their community'.

Regarding what participants felt they learnt, responses included 'how to be creative', 'to be myself', 'to express myself', 'to think of your own drawing not others', 'to make mini books', 'to just try', 'to draw things' and 'how to make zines'.

Thinking about how the workshop made them feel in relation to their local community and environment, six people felt the workshop made them 'think about Kings Heath', three made people 'think about the local outdoor space', while other responses included the 'local people' (2), 'the local shops' (2), 'local safety' (1) or 'local activities' (1).

When asked about future workshops and arts projects, 17 participants said they would 'like more of these workshops', 16 would 'like to be more involved in arts projects in Kings Heath' and 14 participants stated they had 'made a connection with new people'.



## Project insights from in-depth interviews

Two in-depth interviews were conducted on 23 August 2024, after the project had finished. These interviews were conducted by Dr Polly Jarman, the project research assistant. Responses were loosely structured around the following topics:

- The project practicalities, what went well, what challenges were faced, any surprises or adaptations, what strategies worked for engagement.
- The purpose of the project and did the project meet its intentions.
- Future developments and ideas for new projects.
- Examples of opportunities this project opened for residents – impact, conversations, themes emerging, artistic empowerment.
- Relationship building - new relationships, new partnerships, other contacts.
- Links with community empowerment – anything that came up specifically for different community members.

In the following, responses from both interviews will be discussed in relation to the above themes. Consent has been given for the responses to be named, as these conversations were held with a small number of key stakeholders.

### What went well?

#### Function and appropriateness of zines as a medium for communicating

When asked what went well with the project, the project team agreed that the actual process of zine making was both a new process and something they felt went well. They felt the workshops were appropriately adaptable and changed responsively as the project continued. As Andy commented:

*'This is the first time (the) three of us had operated in that manner, (...) one of the key ideas was to connect with participants in Kings Heath, to think about how arts practices could link to decision making processes for people living there and how that could connect to future forms of arts commissioning, that is arts that are dialogical in their methods and processes. So, the zine making project was a good attempt, I think, at trying to have a format and use particular media to test out how people might engage in that.'*

Mel added that the use of zines functioned well to facilitate people to creatively share their beliefs and thoughts about their local area:

*Zines are often a reflection of personal beliefs, which is why they share a natural connection with manifestos. At their core, they're about publishing your ideas and values. Zines provide a platform for exploring questions like, 'What should happen? What shouldn't happen? What do I agree or disagree with?' This format, focused on the 'for and against,' is quite effective in shaping opinions. We were interested in engaging creatively through hands-on techniques like printing, cutting, and layering, all while reflecting on what we genuinely believed about a given topic'*

Michael further highlighted that the use of photos and photocopies of places around Kings Heath facilitated participants to annotate, draw over and reimagine specific locations around Kings Heath:

*'because they could take a specific photo of a place in Kings Heath and say 'this is what I want there,' or 'this is what I want it to look like'. So, it was almost like a speculative futures project in that way, they could just take that and say 'this is what it's going to look like in the future, all green and no litter'. And they could give a visual response, a visual answer to the question.' This was not only a tactic used by young people, but also facilitated adults to communicate their opinions, as Mel commented about one adult participant who: 'got hold of a picture and started to do a*

*future and was painting a mural on one of the walls on the precinct square. Maybe we were intuiting that when we gave them the pictures, but it was really interesting to see her.'*

The nature of zines being created from mixed media encouraged experimentation, trying things out, cutting, pasting, copying and this meant that people could adapt and test techniques and try new methods. This 'creative innovation', as Andy called it, was something the project team noticed at most workshops, for example Mel notes:

*'We gave them an A4 sheet of paper folded to A5 and then one of the young people started cutting off the edges and we were like, 'Oh my God. Well, of course, you know, it doesn't have to be a square''.*

#### Flexibility of workshop design, timing and structure

Throughout the project, the team noted how the workshops were successful in being flexible in their format and approach, accommodating different needs, desires and situations. This is something the team are keen to communicate when writing future - funding applications, to acknowledge the complexities of the practical aspects of delivering workshops in communities, something that is often difficult to communicate in funding applications, as Mel notes:

*'I wanted to mention the reflexive process that unfolds when delivering a project. It's that gap between writing the funding application and the actual reality of implementing the project that I'm referring to.'*

The tension, highlighted by Mel, between the application and the delivery shall be discussed in more depth below. Here, it is worth noting how the capacity for the workshops to be flexible was a strength of the project. Furthermore, Michael felt that the timing of the workshops worked well and facilitated a productive and effective process to produce materials:

*'I was initially concerned about how limited our time was with each group—it didn't feel like enough. However, the simplicity of the zine-making process, combined with asking the young people thoughtful questions, quickly proved effective. They had plenty of responses, which allowed us to produce tangible, meaningful content right away. The zine-making process is an excellent way to rapidly create something with a clear message. The variety of materials also gave participants the freedom to engage in whichever way suited them best.'*

### **Working with young people**

Despite the challenge of finding adults to work with (discussed below), one of the key positive outcomes for the project team was working with young people and noticing their energy and creativity. As Mel mentioned:

*'That was joyous. Well, one of my surprises was I really enjoyed working with the kids. I really got into it and I thought I'd be nervous about it, but they were really like, 'Oh, look at these scissors. Can we use them miss? Can we use these scissors?'' (...) some more young people started putting the black tape on their eyebrows and they started making moustaches. There was this amazing sort of freedom in some of what they were doing.'*

Michael added that there was a real pride coming from the young people's creative efforts:

*'there was one lad that was quite shy and reserved, but had this, like, a smile on his face throughout the whole process. And at the end (he) was just beaming while quietly telling the story of his zine. And I think that pride comes from the agency they had to create what they wanted. There was a freedom as they could choose the content. You know, as well as design the look and feel of the zine, which was nice to see.'*

### **Collaborating together**

With one adult participant, the process of zine making necessitated a more collaborative and open-ended approach. Through visits, chats at a coffee morning and ongoing conversations about greenspace, the team met with a stakeholder heavily involved in the local community allotment. Rather than this stakeholder producing a zine in a one-off workshop, Mel describes the emergent process they co-created to produce slogans and a zine:

*'We took a slightly different approach with her. I attended a coffee morning and ended up having coffee with her, during which I wrote a slogan based on our conversation and gave it to her. I also printed some leaves, thinking perhaps we could incorporate something related to the allotment. Afterward, I transcribed a few of her thoughts from our chat into a small, four-page zine and gave it to her when we met again. I said, 'I made this for you from our conversation.' She responded by offering her own slogan, and we decided to include both. So, instead of the more structured workshop format we used with the younger participants, this interaction was more informal and organic. But without the zine, I'm not sure we would've had such a meaningful conversation.'*

Collaborating on creating slogans and zines together worked to form relationships with the individual adult participants who were stakeholders involved in specific aspects of the community. Through the process of creating together conversations about issues that matter to local residents were shared. This process is longer and, as Andy notes:

*'it becomes like a hook. To keep going back and having conversations and then co-writing it and producing it.'*

Carolyn considers this as a productive part of working creatively with communities:

*'I think using creative means to engage people is really good, and I'd be interested in exploring it further. (...) So, for me, it wasn't about the production of the zine itself. It was about what people were thinking about and what people were making, you know, the topic of 'their' zine. (...) So, for me the art, the creativity and the production of a zine is a means to an end and the end is developing the understanding about the community, what it values. And which bits of the community it wants to develop, what we need to build on in order to grow the community. I think that's what I wanted to get from the project and I think we probably did get that.'*

### **Clear messages from participants**

For Carolyn and the community development teams from the council, the project was important because of its potential to engage residents in sharing what they want, need, desire or fear about where they live. Carolyn remarked that the medium of the zine was effective in facilitating clear communication of messages from participants:

*'It's clear in some of the zines—whether they feature football, skate parks, or lots of trees—what the participants are focused on. Some express more negative themes, while others have straightforward messages, like 'there are no buses.' Of course, there's always a level of interpretation when the message isn't immediately clear, but many zines make it obvious what's needed, like play equipment or other specific desires. For me, that level of clarity shows really strong engagement.'*

## What were some challenges of the project

### Age range of participants

One of the challenges highlighted by the project team included the age range of participants they ended up recruiting, which was younger than they had hoped. Most workshops were delivered to school-aged children and young people from the youth club and this impacted the kinds of conversations and topics being explored. Andy comments:

*'I initially expected a broader demographic, but on the ground, we primarily engaged with younger age groups through schools and youth clubs. This focused our conversations on their specific experiences of living in the area. It turned out to be fantastic, as the young people were eager to share their thoughts with us. They seemed excited to express themselves and appreciated being listened to. While some aimed to say the 'right' thing, many were also quite mindful and reflective in their responses.'*

Michael wondered whether adults were less up for participating because the materials might have been perceived as children's activities:

*'And I don't know if it's because of that or there's a general sort of anxiety for adults to get involved in something like this, especially in a public space.'*

A related challenge was to find different ways to work with adult participants within the community in Kings Heath. This is recognised by Carolyn as being something common across projects within the area. When discussing how the project needed to adapt to different age groups, this was noted by Carolyn as being part of the challenge of engagement within the community:

*'I also think that is part of the problem I suppose. And it's just about engaging community in Kings Heath. That's really difficult. Finding people to take part, I think was quite a challenge and some of that comes down to there not being*

*good places for people to meet, so there's no community centre and we've talked about that quite a lot in different contexts, but there's no home for communities to come to and to gather. So that is always a limit, but I'd like to think that the partners kind of came up with alternative solutions and opened doors and created opportunities.'*

As the project team noted, specific individuals emerged through the process as key stakeholders, including the local woman who volunteered with the community allotment, mentioned above. As Michael commented:

*'(She) is a vital community stakeholder in Kings Heath, and such individuals are hard to find. We discovered this during the coffee mornings and walking groups—true community voices were largely absent. The process we went through with (her) felt quite organic, and I'm not sure if it's something that can be easily replicated with every stakeholder encounter. However, promoting the allotment and green space is exactly the type of initiative we want to support. It was a wonderful outcome, and it would be great to engage more with people like her in the future.'*

While this relationship developed through the project and generated ideas for zine making, most interactions with adults were difficult. Michael attended the local fun day with the pop-up workshop kit, hoping to engage more adults in the making of a zine:

*'I tried to engage quite a few people in conversation, adults about it, as well as asking them to do zines. And it was very difficult to get any conversation, out of it, to be honest.'*

For Andy, one challenge working with adults was the duration of the workshop not being long enough for more in-depth engagement:

*'I think originally, we'd dreamed of that longer engagement with people where people could do more storytelling. (...) I suppose what we had for the majority of our contact was really brief, 20 minutes, half an hour of intense activity. (...) but the process that we had with*

*(the allotment stakeholder) over time, would be terrific because it would be more productive, getting to know them, getting to know what (and) how they think, and how that could influence community development.'*

### Nature of the 'pop-up' workshop

As the team have stated, the original plans for the project were to have longer engagement with people returning to more than one workshop, so that their relationships could be strengthened. Therefore, as Andy stated:

*'I feel a bit frustrated by the nature of our approach, which was necessary due to the lack of a dedicated space to work from. We didn't have the opportunity to conduct workshops with the young people or our respondents in a way that would allow for deeper development of their ideas. On one hand, the speed of our operations was beneficial because it yielded instant results, but it limited our ability to engage in reflective discussions with them during or after the process. This felt like just the first step. If we had the chance to work with them again, it would be much more interesting to explore their opinions in depth—drawing out the meaning behind their ideas and allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the problems they perceive.'*

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### **Working with drop-in youth spaces and with university ethical procedures**

Another challenge for the team was getting participants to complete the ethical consent forms and evaluations, particularly at the youth club, as Mel describes:

*'the youth club was more like working with a passer-by. They would be dropping in, dropping out, doing a bit of gaming, talking to their mate, you know. I think that became difficult for the evaluations.'*

University procedures require young people to complete ethical consent forms regarding the use of their data and this was also a challenge for informal and drop-in spaces where parents and carers are not present:

*'I struggled with the ethical requirements, particularly around needing parental consent for anyone under 18. I tried addressing this with the youth club leader, but she explained that the parents rarely engage. She offered to hand out the consent forms, but warned they wouldn't be returned—and indeed, we didn't get any back. This highlighted a tension between the academic expectations and the realities of working on the ground.'*

The challenge of trying to adhere to academic processes while working in pop-up, casual and informal community settings meant that there was a felt tension between the expectations from both spaces, as Michael describes:

*'It's challenging because these are two completely different worlds, and it's nearly impossible to make them align. Community-based work and the academic rigour that's expected just don't mesh easily. When working with children, in particular, starting with a consent form immediately sets the wrong tone. It's not conducive to creative research. It makes it harder to get them engaged and excited, especially when the work is meant to be a fast-paced, creative process.'*

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### **What themes emerged from the zines?**

#### **Values and morals from school**

In terms of the themes emerging from zine making, the team felt that at points, the young people were communicating more generic themes from learnt values and rules from school but that there were also more specific issues to Kings Heath emerging, as Michael states:

*'I think there was this idea of generic values coming out like 'don't litter, be nice to people, more green space,' you know. But then when I think at the youth club, when you drill down and you asked, you would get some specific responses around like places to play football.'*

Some of these more generic themes included projects that young people were completing at school, such as no littering, no swearing, more art classes. As Mel mentioned:

*'This provided a real insight into how young people's thinking is shaped, especially in relation to behaviour. You could see it in practice—things like 'no litter!' or being respectful to others—and it became clear they were echoing what they've been taught, or even performing the values of the school.'*

#### **Greenspace**

With some of the younger participants, themes related to greenspace included more places to play football and more planting of flowers. However, with the adult participant involved in the allotment, the team developed a different approach to working, which became a more organic back and forth sharing of slogans and messages related to plants, greenspace and the allotment. Through this emerging relationship, the team gained a clear insight into the values and process of creating a 'survival garden' in the allotment and were keen to develop stronger connection with the residents volunteering in the garden. As Mel describes:

*'I was interested in the allotment, and the more I spoke with her, the more I realized just how much specialist knowledge she had. I learned about her plans for the flower beds she'd been planting, which were full of spiky plants—not just to survive, but also to discourage people from touching them. It was a clever, sophisticated approach, reflecting her deep, learned relationship with the public spaces in Kings Heath. I found that fascinating and unexpected.'*

#### **Public space**

Through various zines, there were issues and concerns from young participants to do with some of the activity in public spaces around the community, including littering and swearing and, for one adult participant, the drug taking and drinking that was happening in the allotment.

## What themes emerged from the project process itself

As well as the themes that emerged from the zines themselves, that mattered to the participants and residents of Kings Heath, the interviews highlighted some key considerations and themes that emerged from the doing of the project itself. These concerned the considerations of what is art and what is data, the complexities of creative research practice, and the role of the artist in relation with community development.

### Considerations of what is 'data'

For the project team, further ethical and academic questions arose regarding how to consider, categorise and treat the 'data' being created through this project. For Mel, the university ethical process required that all creative artefacts, including the zines had to be considered research data, and therefore were required to be treated in accordance with university data storage processes. This means that the creative artefacts are both an artistic creation, a piece of art and a data object, from which to extract information about the data subject in relation to the research inquiry.

She describes the complexities around what this means for the processing of data with university ethical processes:

*'I had a lengthy discussion about whether the zines could be considered data. Personally, I don't think they are. If we flip the perspective, we've spent years arguing for practice to be recognized as research. Now suddenly, we're questioning if this is data. But we never called it data before, when it wasn't framed as research. Or is it simply practice? I understand that details like age and name are clearly data, but the zines themselves don't seem to fit that definition. I also have concerns, particularly with co-creation, about when the data becomes 'expired.' For instance, if you're creating an artwork based on data, it might last 25 years, but the data could become outdated in five. There are some big, unresolved questions around this.'*

For an academic creative research project, intending to also share and exhibit the zines publicly as artworks, this caused complications in terms of consent and use of the zines as data and as art.

### Desires for more complex and critical approaches to inquiry

Carolyn was clear that for her, the role of the zine making project was to examine and explore the residents' opinions about where they lived, and to use creative processes to establish relationships and communication:

*'I'm really interested in what's within them. So what's being depicted, what people are talking about, what people have drawn about or the, you know, the topic of the zines. And that's what I'm really interested in as well as who was engaged with, who the team talked to and what they talked about, who they reached and who they didn't.'*

However, for the project team, there was also a sense that this positionality of the artist as community facilitator was more complicated. This tension about the positionality of the academic artist researchers was hard to navigate within this project. Mel found herself torn between wanting to facilitate community and questioning her role in that dynamic:

*'My motivation is to help facilitate community, but then I start questioning, who am I to come in and try to construct one? It leads me to reflect on the moral implications of power—am I only doing this because I'm an academic and feel I have the authority to intervene? I wrestle with those ethical questions. At the same time, I wonder whether we can use the comments from the zines as a form of lobbying material for the council. What surprised me most was the complexity of it all. I knew they needed more spaces to gather, I knew the road needed fixing—I drove over the same potholes every time. I knew they needed better community facilities. Those needs were obvious to me, and to them. But I found myself grappling with what exactly we were there for, and I'm still not entirely sure.'*

They desired more critical space away from the facilitation of the workshops to consider the structural and political contexts of the idea of community and community building, as Mel elaborates on the kind of inquiry into community she is interested in:

*'Reading about concepts like mass publics, different versions of the public, and what constitutes community raises important questions. These ideas are set against a world where individualism is amplified by the very structures we engage with and reinforce as academics. In such a context, what does it really mean to pursue community development.'*

The team reflected on their role within this relationship, asking how academic artist researchers can hold multiple positions that can enable them to examine the complexities of community as well as contribute to the project outcomes that support the practical needs of community development partners. Mel considers how just workshop delivery is:

*'Our work isn't fully aligning with either our research or practice agendas as social practitioners. We're approaching it as an inquiry, not just designing and delivering a workshop. There's an ongoing exploration happening alongside the practical elements.'*

The team desired to have a more critical positionality in relation to questioning 'what is community?', as Michael communicates:

*'where do we see our role right? As artists, designers, academics, do we see our role as trying to help fix those structural problems by enacting policy change? So, using the zines as messages for policymakers, holders, or do we see our role as improving community? Aside from the structural issues, is our role for making spaces for art to happen and for culture to happen? Or both.'*

Carolyn also indicated the desire for more complexity within future projects but from a position of building communities:

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*'I mean, just to say, if they gave me some ideas of some workshops and we go away and do it, I don't think that I would be happy with just that because I want more. I think as you said, it's that relationship and that learning that I want to explore. And then if you know who else can we bring in, what other fields can we have expertise from and bring in if we go down a different route. What would that look like? But ultimately it's still about building communities.'*

From both perspectives, therefore, there is a desire to develop a more complex project that goes beyond workshop delivery. Perhaps where the artist researchers differ from the community development approach is that they would like more critical space for a social inquiry questioning 'what is community?', what are the structural systems that have produced a community that is as isolated as Kings Heath, how can creative projects speak back to systems of power in demonstrating agency and community capacity. Furthermore, as Andy states, to consider the impact of austerity and neoliberalism on services and approaches such as community development and social engaged art practices:

*when community development's been so hard pressed both financially and as an area of thinking and looking for alternatives, it's been a real victim of neoliberalism, particularly in Tory towns like we're in.'*

### **Communicating 'community' within funding applications**

Regarding the evaluation and monitoring of the project outlined in the application for funding, the team felt restricted in how to communicate the project in its wholeness. It was felt that funding applications and project outputs cannot articulate the nuanced realities of working in communities but are limited by workshop numbers and material success in terms of outputs. As Mel describes:

*'It's as if everything seems whole at the outset—that's my question, especially when thinking about the initial bid writing. Community development is often treated as a solid, fixed concept, as if there's an established community and all we need to do is connect the dots to find a solution. But the moment you scratch the surface, you realize there's no clear or cohesive community. So, what is community, really? You start unraveling all these assumptions, and on top of that, there's the pressure—common in community development—to deliver something tangible or frame it as a success, something others can easily point to and say, 'Yes, that worked.'*

The team became aware of the tensions between working within the rigid and bound approach required by academic procedures and working with community, which required flexible, adaptive and fluid processes. This became an ethical dilemma for the team, acknowledging that much of the outlined plan, process and outcomes expected from the funding application were, in practice, not the real crux of the project.

## What might be some future developments of projects and partnerships?

### **Nurturing creative connections**

When discussing possibilities for future project development, Carolyn was keen for this pilot to evolve into more creative approaches to engaging community members and building trust. While she acknowledges there are a couple of arts programmes in Northampton focused on encouraging participation, she considers this collaboration unique, with its focus on how to

*'build this small community and its capacity and involve it and engage it and develop this place'.*

For her, the relationship with the artist team has been beneficial for her community development teams too:

*'I like working with the team. I think they're really inspirational and reflective and thoughtful. And open to new ideas. And I want to do more.'*

The recognition of the value of creative processes to community engagement also means that, for Carolyn, future projects might also extend to other creative mediums, such as dance and music and attempt to reach those within the community who are creative:

*'I'm not aware of anybody. I could probably think of the different areas that we work in and know that we've got people that will do different things. You kind of have an idea of people that you could draw on to do things creatively. I don't think we found that person in Kings Heath yet, unless we're in the wrong medium, you know, it's unless it's about music, etc.'*

When asked about the role of the arts in relation to the community development teams, she stated:

*'I think what I'm really interested in exploring is different ways that the community development workers can engage with communities. So how we meet people and how we start those conversations with people about where*

*they live and to what they aspire to have in that place and what's important, what services they need. It's really hard to have those conversations out of the blue. (...) So any means by which we can kind of soften that, introduce it slowly, build relationships, build trust and make a conversation non-confrontational. I just think it helps to give people that space to kind of let their mind wander and let them think about it a little bit. I definitely want to see art, the arts in its broadest sense, let's say, be used.'*

### **Developing work with the allotment**

The team were excited by the gardening happening in the allotment, how the gardening project held tensions between those volunteers and the rest of the community and how it might represent some of the broader tensions to do with use of public space and community cohesion. Mel notes how the garden volunteer:

*'was a bit split between wanting it to get the attention it needed, but also wanting to hold on to some of its principles, which were really interesting, like old English herbs that are really specific. She's really good at planting schemes in terms of how things could be planted to give you food and that were easy to grow'.*

There was an enthusiasm to consider how the project team could collaborate more with the allotment, as Michael argues:

*'It could be its own project, right? Like separate to the zine project, completely different. Just with (the stakeholder) and the green space and Kings Heath and the allotment could be its own funded project.'*

### **Establishing clear roles as artist researchers**

The project team discussed the different roles they could play or develop with the community development teams, thinking about how their roles as artists might be distinct from the community development teams but also complement each other. For Carolyn and her team, they are keen to implement creative processes to access community needs and opinions and to build relationships. However, as Andy states, this brings up questions regarding the role of the artist researcher:

*'We find ourselves caught between different roles in this project. On one hand, we're part of a funded initiative focused on finding solutions and creating impact, which raises questions about being instrumentalized. We've been grappling with how projects like this intersect with our roles as both researchers and artists. We don't have a clear answer yet, but we're reflecting on how to move forward. How do we operate in this kind of environment without becoming mere service providers, while still posing critical questions about art and artistic production?'*

Given their roles and employment within the university, the project team were conflicted with how their academic and critical inquiry into community and public sphere arts projects played out. They were keen to assert that their role is not as workshop facilitators or community development workers but as creative researchers and therefore wish through future projects to assert this positionality and use it to their advantage, as Mel states:

*'We bring a unique perspective to this project and are deeply invested in it. One of our goals is to leverage our agency from art and design, as well as our professional roles, to offer our skills and volunteer in meaningful ways. However, that volunteering needs to align with our inquiry. It raises the question: how can we adapt university structures to benefit other contexts? In essence, how can the university contribute back to the community?'*

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### **Developing a residency or longer-term project in the community**

To have the space and capacity to think with some of the more entangled research questions of what community might mean or look like, the project team proposed various ways in which their role could become more reflective or critical. This is important for future work because, as Michael highlights:

*'I agree that if we were to undertake a similar project again, we'd likely achieve the same outcomes, as we'd be engaging with the same participants. Therefore, we need to find new ways to integrate with the community if we want to continue this work.'*

This might be through a more durational relationship with the area, through creating their own artistic outputs in responses to their relationships or by having more distance from the role of the artist as the provider or workshop facilitator, to enable a more embedded and critical positionality. Michael proposes:

*'We want to conduct a socio-political inquiry in an apolitical manner, engaging in critical discussions with the residents of Kings Heath independently of the council. This is understandably challenging, given how projects are funded and the necessity of council support to connect with those residents. Ideally, I envision building on our existing work and approaching it in a more critical way—perhaps by positioning ourselves as artist residents of Kings Heath, truly embedded in the community.'*

For Mel, approaching future projects as artists in residence is appealing:

*'I find the artist-in-residency programme an interesting idea for Kings Heath because it hopefully provides a space to meet. It could also be a longer-term process, allowing us to build a community around us. Having dedicated space or a place to be in residence would enable more ambitious projects and foster an organic development of relationships.'*

Within the team, there was recognition that their future work could address the more structural and political reasons why Kings Heath is underserved, lacking services, transport connections, social centres and infrastructural funding. The team therefore consider perhaps Kings Heath itself becoming the subject of the study, in order to separate their research from the work of the community development teams; to focus on the place itself would enable a wider set of relations and approaches as Mel considers:

*'Kings Heath becomes a quasi-subject matter of our work as well as, so it's both co-produced and co-created but also at the same time the content of our practice.'*

This idea of the place itself becoming the subject, allows for dialogical and public sphere work to be undertaken in a more critical way by the artists and community, as Andy argues:

*'This approach helps us avoid repeating community or public art practices we've been critiquing for decades. Instead, we can establish clear principles, values, and politics that shape the kind of art and design ideas we generate. It's essential to bring our motivations to the forefront, ensuring we don't simply reproduce the same outdated practices. This is where the research resides – thinking about how arts can contribute to community development. Our aim is to go beyond engagement and to support community workers as well as communities.'*

For Carolyn, the proposal of a longer-term engagement within Kings Heath was also appealing, but ties in again with her longer-term focus on reducing health inequalities and establishing community relationships within the neighbourhood:

*'we're constantly looking for those activities that we can draw people in and engage people. But I suppose what I want is something bigger. I want a bigger bang. I want something that's much more complex than just a one off a 20-minute thing. Or it could be lots of things that added together is much*

*more complex. That helps us really think about how we engage people in regenerating their community through the arts. That's what I want.'*

Her focus on building community through the arts and learning about people's needs and desires through the arts connects to her team's wider remit on reducing health inequalities, and she argues these things come together in tandem:

*'So how do we reduce health inequalities just by involving people in an arts project feels really weak but actually, it's not because you're connecting them to community, you're connecting them to place and you're getting them to really explore something around the wider determinants of health. So that could be it could be the natural environment and access to it. It could be their health and well-being in terms of physical activity. Or it could be green travel or travel access to services and all that kind of stuff. It's about those wider determinants of health, isn't it? But it's got to start with people. And bringing people together in valuing where they live or who is around them.'*



