

Learning lessons the hard way



The picture couldn't look rosier for community musicians, apparently. Some serious backing and exciting new partnerships are being dangled in front of community artists' eyes, and it seems the time is ripe for music to play an even greater role in communities and society as a whole. But, finds Anita Holford, community artists and community development workers don't necessarily see eye to eye

A convincing case is being made for the value of community arts in regenerating poor neighbourhoods and increasing community participation. A government report into the value of the arts and sport (the ubiquitous PAT 10, which forms the starting block for most current policy thinking) concluded by recommending that they become a central part of regeneration initiatives. Policy makers and funders of all persuasions – from education to housing, employment to health – are being encouraged to use the A word (or most often the more popular word of the moment, 'creativity') in their plans.

As the professional practice that's evolved to improve and develop communities, community development is seen – certainly by the government – as the model to which arts practitioners wanting to work with communities should aspire. PAT 10 says that "the principles of community development approach should

underpin and build on the ways in which local authority culture/leisure strategies and services are developed". But although government spin might suggest a rosy future, where community artists are welcomed with open arms by their peers in community development, naturally there is scepticism.

Last year at *Music for a changing world*, a conference for community musicians organised by Sound Sense, musicians and academics began raising a raft of important issues about the implications of working within these other sectors. Fears were aired about the effects it would have on community musicians' practice, and whether their principles would be diluted. Questions were raised about whose agendas would drive community music in this new world, what it would be expected to deliver, and whether all community music is really fit for the purpose. Community workers are asking similar questions.

John Street, a youth and community worker in Nechells, an inner-city area of Birmingham, is convinced of the value of music in community work but wary of professionals, a view shared by many community workers: "Initially, they're very gifted and talented, but they do tend to do a 'hit and run' leaving us to pick up the pieces. When they finish their project and leave, who provides the resources, the training and the relationships for those who remain behind

with their false hopes and expectations of freedom crushed by the disappearance of the community musician?"

His experience of trying to develop an arts project entirely voluntarily, has meant that he's learnt community arts lessons the hard way. Identifying an interest in developing a performing arts production in Nechells, he brought together a voluntary team of professional artists – an actor, dancer, costume designer, and musician. "We made loads of mistakes, but we learnt a huge amount, and the artists learnt a lot about what it's like to work with a community." He explains. "We decided to start off by doing some workshops, getting people to come along to see what it was like and build up gradually, so it was very *laissez faire*. So then when we started having rehearsals, there was a constant turnover of people because it was still seen as something where anyone could get involved, and it became difficult to progress. We got to a stage where we knew we weren't going to reach the performance, so we decided to focus on what could be achieved, just one song and dance. So we realised that people want structure and routine, and that we needed to develop a democratic leadership style, rather than a *laissez faire* approach. And we found that we needed to look at what skills we could bring in from the community, rather than the professional artist making all the creative input."

Street also discovered that difficulties which arise when professional artists are unused to working with people with little experience of a particular art-form are compounded when the artists don't know the community. Street himself lives in the community in which he works, and although this isn't common amongst community workers, he believes that it helps. "Community development is a long term approach. I don't follow the traditional model of saying, 'I'm here, I'll find a group of people, I'll ask them what they want to do', because I feel people are still looking for someone to inspire and support them but they'll accept that much more readily from someone they know to share their concerns. I feel if I want to understand people's needs, they have to become my needs. They then know it's the same for me as it is for them. And the other big thing is, they know I'm not going to leave. Turnover of helpers is a problem for communities. People are always asking 'how long's this one going to stay?'"

Street believes that musicians can make the most impact on a community as part of a team who are committed to a holistic approach to community development: "How do the community musicians form a group of people who are interested enough to participate, and how do they do this in a multi-faith, multi-cultural, musically diverse inner city area? How do community musicians really understand the needs of people, and understand that their perceptions of disadvantage may be different to the communities? There's an expression that

'it takes a whole village to raise a child'. I think its best to work as part of a team. The focus needs to be people-based, not project-based, and long-term. My idea would be to bring together a group of people with specific gifts, but who can help each other to understand how to use those within a particular context."

David Tyler, honorary secretary of the Community Sector Coalition, an alliance of community groups and director of Community Matters, the national federation of community organisations, believes that one of the biggest criticisms of professional artists can be equally applied to other professions working in communities: "There's always going to be a tension with professional musicians, in the same way there is with professional regeneration experts in other fields. Much of the good intention has been lost in the translation because of the need from the professionals' point of view to have an easy package that can be replicated. Professionals come in and 'do' the package to the community, and then go away, and the community is left with the after glow but nothing permanent. It's not sustainable, they're not able to carry it on themselves."

The relationship between the needs and interests of the professional artist or organisa-

Community development is a structured intervention that gives communities greater control over the conditions that affect their lives. This does not solve all the problems faced by a local community, but it does build up confidence to tackle such problems as effectively as any local action can. Community development works at the level of local groups and organisations – the community sector – rather than with individuals or families

Community Development Foundation

tion, and those of the community is one of the issues that puts the community into community arts, and divides it from other forms of practice. But it's a knowledgeable community worker who makes that distinction. The boundary between community arts and the top-down type of educational outreach work is often blurred by practitioners themselves, so how difficult must it be for community workers to make the subtle distinction?

"There's a lot of evidence now that arts really is the way to help build communities," says Tyler. "But a lot of these things do start from the principle of 'wouldn't it be fun to do this and to achieve this with this particular group' – 'this group' being notionally characterised as 'not arts lovers', or 'not naturally creative', and it's more about the achievement of the professional coming in, achieving some form of transformation of their understanding, rather than 'what's the real contribution that



the arts could make to this community.”

Val Harris is a trainer and consultant for the voluntary and community sectors and chair of both the Federation of Community Work Training Groups, and the England Standard Board for Community Work. “There’s an increasing recognition within community work that the traditional ways of engaging people, like public meetings, are a waste of space, and people are desperately looking at new ways to deal with it.” She says. “We use community arts in many different projects, for engaging people in participation, getting people’s views prior to redevelopment of poor areas. Music is important as a way of negotiating your way in to some communities, and helping them to decide what they want to do.”

If the community development sector is still divided on its perception of the role of community arts, Harris believes another reason may be to do with changes in who delivers community work now. Regeneration agencies

with their cross-cutting agendas may not be the brave new hope that community artists might expect: “Some people will not have even heard of community music because of where they’ve come from. We had the Thatcher years, when there wasn’t a lot of money around for community work. With this government there’s more money, but it’s not community work in the sense of going into a community and working with a whole range of groups, doing whatever was needed. It’s all targeted now, mainly at education, health, crime or increasingly, employment. And the people that head up these partnership things haven’t got a clue about community work. They have it as part of their job description, but don’t even see the need to engage people. So it depends on where people come from. I think people who’ve grown up around community work are more likely to be looking at different methods.”

But the scepticism amongst community workers still comes back to that thorny issue of community ownership, and it’s a view that’s shared by many community workers: “The real tension arises when someone sees the opportunity to get some money and move into the area without negotiating locally, and that’s true particularly of large organisations,” says Harris. “If you go in in that way, and you don’t understand the structures and the systems, and how people are defining their communities, then it’s a recipe for disaster, because it’s seen as yet again someone coming in to tell the poor areas what they need. If you’re going in because people are inviting you in, then you don’t have quite the same tensions because you’re working to their agendas.”

Yet waiting to be invited isn’t always the solution either, and what musicians need to achieve is a delicate balancing act, as Claire McColgan of Arts and Regeneration (Speke Garston Ltd) explains: “You can go too much either way. People don’t always know what they want. So you tap into people in different ways. Sometimes there’s a need for really innovative, high quality projects to work within a community and see what develops out of that, once people have achieved that first step and have more of an idea of where they want to go. And it’s the courage to make that first step that many people need. The work we do is about giving people a voice to tell their own story, putting a bit more of a human aspect into regeneration.”

Clearly community workers and community musicians would benefit from sharing their knowledge and practices. Exposure to different ways of working is a starting point for both professions, and Harris’s advice to musicians is to investigate opportunities through short courses and other events around the UK: “There are regional community worker training groups who can help with information.

There’s a variety of learning routes available for those interested in community development work

- *Introduction to community work skills courses (Likely to be the most useful for community musicians interested in this area of work, these courses are run through regional training bodies throughout the UK, are often accredited, and attract a range of participants, from volunteers to regeneration professionals)*
- *Courses to develop specific community work skills*
- *General voluntary sector training on relevant topics, such as running community groups, fundraising*
- *University/college courses on community work and community development - some of which include a nationally recognised professional community work qualification*
- *SINVQ in community work*
- *Certificate in community and youth work*

Federation of Community Work Training Groups has more information

LINKS

Federation of Community Work Training Groups

Supports the work of regional community work training groups and establishes community work standards and national frameworks for training and qualification. Has useful publications; a list is available.

4th Floor, Furnival House,
48 Furnival Gate, Sheffield S1 4QP
T: 0114-273 9391 F: 0114-276 2377
E: info@FCWTG.demon.co.uk

Community Matters

The federation for community associations provides information, advice, publications, events, training, consultancy and lobbying on behalf of its members who include multi-purpose community organisations, local authorities, housing associations. Information sheets (£1.50 plus p&p) cover topics such as safeguarding children and young people and the need for training in a community organisation.

Community Matters, 8/9 Upper Street,
London, N1 0PQ T: 020 7226 0189
F: 020 7354 9570

E: communitymatters@communitymatters.org.uk
W: www.communitymatters.org.uk

Community Sector Coalition

Alliance of more than 20 national networks of community sector groups and supporting organisations.

Contact via Community Matters

Community Development Foundation (CDF)

Promotes and develops new forms of community development through local action projects; development of best practice; research, evaluation and policy analysis; consultancies and training programmes; conferences and seminars; information and publications. Website provides definitions and information about community development.

60 Highbury Grove, London N5 2AG
T: 020 7226 5375 E: admin@cdf.org.uk
W: www.cdf.org.uk

Creative Regeneration: lessons from ten community arts projects

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has been looking at what works in the regeneration of deprived neighbourhoods since 1992; this publication details lessons learnt by ten projects in Wales.

£12.95 from Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO30 6WP T: 01904 629241
Minicom: 01904 615910 F: 01904 620072 W: www.jrf.org.uk

Issues for the conduct of community music

Proposes 19 'issues' which represent the some of the key questions faced by community music practitioners, to stimulate debate about community music practice.

Free from Sound Sense; see page 3

The what, why and how of neighbourhood community development

A view of community development and what it can achieve in a neighbourhood.

£3.95 including p&p from Community Matters

Community work skills manual

Community worker's practice guide written by community workers, covering everything from the values and principles underlying community work, to roles and responsibilities, working with groups, community surveys.

£15.00 plus p&p from Association of Community Workers T: 0191-272 4341

ABCD (Achieving Better Community Development) handbook

The 'ABCD' method for understanding and evaluating community development is used throughout the UK. This core text describes the approach; a full resource pack to guide an organisation through the process is also available

£9.95 from Community Development Foundation

Meeting up with community workers at these events and trying to see if you could work together, and look into opportunities to get funding for joint work would be a good way forward. In the long term some of the national organisations representing the two professions could consider joint workshops, where people can explore why community work is there, why community musicians are wanting to go into communities, and if you start at that point, you can come to some shared understanding of what we're trying to achieve, and find a way forward."

But perhaps the crux of the matter, and the issue that will continue to divide the two practices, is the purpose that drives the practice. Says Harris: "It's not just about music skills. When musicians are working in community development the starting point should be the community, not the music. Music is the tool, it helps to build groups, build teams, develop social interaction and it's the social skills that are needed afterwards as much as

anything else. So what music allows us to do is to develop these sustainable skills, if you like the social capital of the community capacity building. It doesn't matter if at the end people haven't learnt to play anything, what matters is that they've achieved something for their estate, their area, and that's the important bit. And to have given people a view of a wider world that they might not have experienced before, so they don't just get trapped by the boundaries that where they live places on them."

Some of the harshest criticisms from community workers are those which community musicians themselves would empathise with. No self-respecting community arts practitioner would want to admit to many of the crimes that these community workers identify, but they happen. It would be naïve and unhelpful to believe that the two professions will ever give the same priority to their various objectives, common or not, but better understanding across the two professions could lay many of the concerns to rest.