

Participation in the Arts, Knowledge Exchange: Place and Participation

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[**slide 1]

Addressing place-related challenges and the impact on participation: barriers, boundaries and bridges

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Collective Encounters is a small professional arts organisation specialising in theatre for social change. [**slide 2] Since our inception in 2004 we have been based in north Liverpool. We run an extensive participatory programme with a wide range of marginalised communities; we make professional work tackling pressing social and political concerns, which animates unusual spaces, grows out of grass roots community research, and reaches non-traditional audiences; and we carry out and disseminate research with a view to contributing to the wider development of the field. We're a regularly funded organisation with Arts Council England and as of next year will be part of their National Portfolio. Our additional funds are predominately project based with current main funders including Children in Need, Baring Foundation and Big Lottery. While the bulk of our work takes place in north Liverpool, and our offices are there, we do work across the region and are beginning to develop national and international projects. We believe that the work we undertake at local level has a wider international resonance, and that it's important to build bridges between people and places. Despite this widening of our reach, however, the heart of our programme will always remain in north Liverpool.

North Liverpool is a fascinating area. [**slide 3] It has a very small geographical spread – only 4 or 5 miles squared - [**slide 4] but has more than its fair share of place-related barriers to engagement. [**slide 5] Some of these are economic, some logistical, some are political, some geographical, some are historical and others psychological. [**slide 6] But they all relate firmly to place. From dividing roads to divide and conquer funding policies; from gated communities to no-go territories; [**slide 7] from religious division to insularity, north Liverpool is alive with place-related challenges.

My presentation today will [**slide 8] set out some of the main place-related issues affecting north Liverpool that, in my experience, translate very much to similar urban areas, and I'll highlight how these impact on participation generally and in the arts specifically. I'll also talk about some of the most important ways we've found of trying to address and overcome these barriers.

[**slide 9] Before we begin to dwell on the challenges and negatives, though, it's very important to be clear that North Liverpool is full of incredibly committed people and strong community organisations who are working hard to overcome these barriers, manage change effectively, and bring about positive transformations within their communities. There's a great deal of fantastic work happening there; many thriving communities; bustling local shopping areas and positive community activities. There's been a phenomenal amount of change and development over the past 7 or 8 years, and many parts of north Liverpool are unrecognisable now. However, this presentation is about the challenges and problems inherent in place and geography, and I'm afraid there are still many.

The first, and I think most significant, place-related issue is poverty. [**slide 10] North Liverpool ranks in the top 10 in the Indices of Multiple Deprivation. That means, according to Liverpool's Sustainable Development Plan, that "vast swathes of north Liverpool remain in the worst 10% in the country in terms of employment, education/skills/training, and living environment". Up to 87% of children in north Liverpool are living in poverty, and one north Liverpool ward (Everton) has the highest numbers of NEET 16 year olds in Merseyside. Some north Liverpool communities have illiteracy rates of up to 36%. Imagine, more than a third of adults in those communities can't read or write properly.

So the most obvious implication of this kind of poverty is, of course, that people can't afford to pay to join in. [**slide 11] It's all very well arts organisations saying 'well we only charge a couple of pounds for our youth theatre', but that's a couple of pounds more than many of the people we work with can afford. In some instances people can't afford the bus fare to get to sessions, let alone a charge to join in. So to this end, and absolutely core to Collective Encounters' values, we provide all our services free at the point of use. That means that no participant ever pays to be in a workshop. We fundraise and work in partnerships to enable us to offer this service, and if we couldn't do it we'd wind the company up. We also make sure we fundraise sufficiently to have money to provide refreshments, and for expenses, so if someone needs help with bus fares, or child care or other costs related to their participation, we can help them out. Similarly all our shows are free. Like Arts Council, we believe passionately in Great Art for Everyone [slide 12]; but we know that if there's a cost attached it won't reach everyone. We experimented once with charging for tickets – we were struggling a bit financially and so we charged £5 per head for one of our professional shows, but tickets were still free if you had a north

Liverpool postcode. I didn't like the stigma of that, it felt all wrong and we won't do it again.

Another implication of poverty of course, is that many people living in poverty – though of course not all - don't think the arts are for them. **[**slide 13]** Maybe there's been no family history of being involved in "the arts", or perhaps not even a knowledge that it's there at all. People can feel intimidated by leaving their area crossing the threshold into town, then another threshold into an arts space. What do you wear? What do you do? What should you expect? It's art as separate to life, something other and unknown. Maybe something frivolous and unnecessary; something that has no relevance to their lives. So there are multiple boundaries here: poverty (often as a result of living in a geographical area); geographical boundaries between local area and city centre where many arts organisations are sited (and it should be said that I've spoken to many, many people who never leave their local area to go into town – just a mile or so away); and if they get to the city centre then crossing the psychological boundary between the street and the arts space. To combat this we work, wherever possible in non-traditional spaces. **[**slide 14]** We have produced shows in a derelict street, an abandoned mill, empty shops, in parks, community centres, **[**slide 15]** exclusion units, social clubs, youth clubs etc. We deliver most of our workshops in community spaces **[**slide 16]** and places where our catchment groups already feel comfortable. We run our third age theatre **[**slide 17]** group, for instance, from The League of Welldoers, a north Liverpool community centre for older people. **[**slide 18]** We run workshops for homeless people in shelters, and for our core group at The Whitechapel Centre, **[**slide 19]** a homeless support agency based in north Liverpool. We believe that to really enable everyone to engage we need to go to them, **[**slide 20]** not expect them to come finding us!

Occasionally we do work in more traditional spaces. **[**slide 21]** For instance we deliver our youth theatre sessions at Hope University's Cornerstone Theatre on their Creative Campus in Everton. We do this because we believe that north Liverpool young people deserve to have access to fabulous resources, and because we want to raise aspirations and introduce another possible world to them – i.e. the world of higher education. But we understand that crossing the threshold into that space is a challenge. We do preliminary outreach work – short term projects - to recruit participants in youth clubs and more familiar spaces. We meet participants in the lobby and gather them in a group before going through to the theatre. Our youth theatre recently said they really wanted to perform in a mainstream city centre venue and we recognize that that kind of prestige is important

for them, so arranged the Bluecoat. They had a full house and thoroughly enjoyed themselves performing there. We also take our participants on theatre trips and to arts events in other more traditional spaces. But we prepare them for this: discuss expectations, travel together if necessary or meet in a group if town if participants are more confident, discuss the experience afterwards, as well as discussing the arts itself. And of course we cover the cost of tickets for these trips through our fundraising.

But that's presupposing we've engaged people in the first place. **[**slide 22]** Some people are just not used to being engaged in anything – there are huge levels of disengagement – parts of north Liverpool, for instance, have the lowest voter turn out in the country. And in that context there's very little history of arts engagement: as I've said, often a feeling that 'it's not for me'. I suppose in some senses this is more of a psychological barrier than a place related one, but I do think it's underpinned by poverty connected to place. So how do we reach people? We've tried lots of approaches and constantly reinvent our engagement strategies. One of the key ways I've already mentioned is to produce work in places that people can't miss it. For instance, Songs for Silenced Voices was a 10-minute tragic opera tackling issues of homelessness. **[**slide 23]** We first staged it in the St John's Shopping Centre in the run up to Christmas in 2009. More than 500 people stopped to watch it: 75% had rarely or never seen live performance before and over 90% had never seen an opera. When we staged The Harmony Suite **[**slide 24]** in a derelict street in Anfield people were walking past us for a week or two as we did the get in before the show, stopping to ask what we were up to, watching the dress rehearsals and eventually coming back to see the show.

But for participants in workshops it's different. **[**slide 25]** Yes you can advertise in local press and that has some results; you can piggy-back the RSL's tenants mail shots; you can tour participant shows to schools and community centres, all those things work to some degree. But the real key for us has been about working in partnership. There are many community organisations and voluntary sector agencies who work tirelessly to reach, engage and provide services for the most difficult to reach people within their communities – they are experts in their community and they already have a way in, so we go to them and offer them free workshops in their venue, or with their group (because we've fundraised to cover our costs). **[**slide 26]** In the first instance there's often a degree of suspicion – particularly in an area like north Liverpool which has been badly affected in the past by repeated parachute projects: where arts organisations and others have gone in, delivered a project, raised expectations, then left when the money runs out. Our

approach is that we won't offer taster workshops or short-term projects unless we know we can offer a longer-term programme. We wouldn't take funding for a 5 or 10 session programme unless there was something beyond it. So we might offer a youth club 3 free workshops, but then we'd invite the young people to join our on-going youth theatre. We might do a series of drop-in sessions in homeless hostels, but always letting people know that there's an accredited programme starting at the end of the taster series, and so on. So once you gain the trust of the community or voluntary sector organization, and prove you will deliver a quality service, that you understand the user group, you have the right ethos and values to be trusted to work with, often vulnerable, people, partnership working is a great way-in to reaching disenfranchised groups and individuals.

However, **[**slide 27]** there can be politics between community organisations that can pose challenges to working in this way too, and in north Liverpool these have historically been related to place.

I'd like to talk a little now about geographical sub-divisions. As I explained, north Liverpool is only 4 or 5 miles square but it has many complex, sometimes contradictory, boundary lines. It's divided up into Wards and Neighbourhood Management Areas; which sometimes coincide with how people self-determine their own geographical identity and sometimes don't. **[**slide 28]** [Talk a bit about the ward map]. Many of the areas have unique identities and some have particular problems. [elaborate a bit]

Whether or not people agree with how they've been divided up, one thing's for sure: there has been a real sense of fragmentation in the area, a recognition of difference and varying degrees of insularity. This might be historical difference: **[**slide 28]** for instance the division between Catholic and Protestant (Catholics at the bottom of the hill, Protestants at the top). There were sectarian riots in the 19th Century and people in Vauxhall still sometimes refer to 'orange country' pointing up the hill, where several Orange lodges are still located in Breckfield and Everton. Or it might be more recent: barriers between locals and students, for example, handled in many instances insensitively by planners. In Marybone, **[**slide 30]** for instance, a small community of predominately low level housing was recently dwarfed by high-rise student accommodation on 2 sides, and penned in by 2 3 lane roads on the other sides. Consequently students have to walk through the Marybone community to get home after a night out in town; people have lost all the light in their gardens and their privacy, as the students can see into their homes from their higher windows. This has not led to happy relationships between the two communities.

These kinds of local difference have been systematically worsened by divide and conquer funding policies, for which I'm afraid the City Council have often been to blame. [**slide 31]

Millions of pounds of European regeneration money has come into north Liverpool over the past 20 years, but communities have had to bid against each other and compete with each other to get a piece of the pie. This has increased tensions between communities and led to north Liverpool being a bit of a political minefield. Added to that some very strong and powerful community leaders in each of the areas wanting the best for their residents. Things are improving now, with more collaboration taking place, and the situation is much better than it was in 2004 when we first started working there. In our early days, however, it was a real challenge. We realized quickly how important it is to assess the political landscape fully and talk to local people and community leaders on all sides of the divides to try build up a clear picture. While there are great community centres in many of the areas with office space available, and while we were keen to invest money in the local community through rent, it was very evident that to align ourselves with one community over another was impossible if we hoped to reach everyone. We needed to retain impartiality, so took offices at Hope University, which has problems in itself as I'll discuss later, but at least it was removed from the community politics of the differing neighbourhood councils. So in those early days, if we were in partnership with one community neighbourhood council others were suspicious. It was vital for us to build relationships across all the areas, which we have worked hard to do, and we have worked hard to bridge areas. This is not always easy, sometimes you need to get very creative. It's not just the community politics – sometimes funding is ring-fenced, so one of the housing associations, for instance, might give you money for a project but only to be spent on people in their particular area!

Added to that, some participants are just totally uncomfortable crossing neighbourhood boundaries, and feel out of their comfort zone so again, we've tried to offer taster and short-term programmes in each of the areas to build up their confidence before coming into a core group based in one location. For some there are logistical difficulties – the bus service east to west in north Liverpool is non-existent, so someone in Kirkdale would need to get a bus into town and another out of town to get to Anfield, for instance – this could take an hour, but the problem wouldn't necessarily be recognized by someone used to having a car, as they could do the trip in less than 5 minutes. Back to poverty: north Liverpool has a very low level of car ownership.

There are also some physically dangerous territorial issues: there are some gang problems in north Liverpool – a young man was stabbed and killed last year only a couple minutes walk from where our youth theatre meet. So boundaries and thresholds are not purely psychological. Safe guarding and risk assessment are really important, not just dusty policies.

But these safety concerns can lead to further insularity. **[**slide 32]** Liverpool Hope, the university in which we have our offices, has recently re-developed its creative campus and spent several million on a new building, new performance spaces and fabulous landscaping. But it's also put up a security gate all around its perimeter. We took offices at Hope for several reasons, the neutrality issue I've already mentioned; the fact that I set up Collective Encounters as a practice-as-research project whilst still a lecturer there, so had a natural connection; and that our chairman is the recently retired pro-vice chancellor of the university, with a real commitment to engagement and outreach. Hope has a long history of engaging non-traditional students, although has been moving away from its community engagement agenda in recent years. None-the-less Hope lets our youth theatre meet in it's theatre for free and has been very supportive of our work. But the security gate. I think it's awful. A gated community, reminiscent of the old days of ivory towers and red brick elitism. A fabulous resource shut off from its neighbouring community, reinforcing the sense of a separate world. The arguments back are that parents have complained regularly about crime in the local area; about prostitutes propositioning their children on the way back to halls of residence. Some staff have complained of feeling uncomfortable with homeless people waking through the campus on their way to The Whitechapel Centre. And, the argument goes, there is a gap in the gate, anyone can still come in – it's right by the security lodge. Our youth theatre members keep on coming and they did a site-specific piece to animate the grounds. We facilitated some of our ex-homeless participants to perform in the theatre there as part of the annual Cornerstone Festival, **[**slide 33]**, and the participants really enjoyed the experience. But it makes me uneasy; having an office in a gated community doesn't fit well with theatre for social change. And it's another example of a geographical boundary presenting a barrier to engagement.

So **[**slide 34]** from the many hurdles presented by poverty; to community politics and area sub-divisions; from historical divides to new boundaries; place and geography play a very significant role in arts engagement. We continue to try and tackle these challenges as best we can because, to quote from our Manifesto: **[**slide 35]** "We believe that the arts are

vital to a healthy, thriving society; that great art has been at the heart of all great civilizations; and that all people should have the right and the opportunity to engage with high quality art that helps them make sense of their world.”

I'm sure that much of what I've said today is familiar to many of you and I'm sorry not to be able to offer you any great pearls of wisdom, but I do think it's worth stopping every now and again to remind ourselves of the huge challenges posed by some of these geographical and place related boundaries and I hope to have gone some way towards doing that. It's easy to roll off the statistics and 'know' about barriers to participation, and sometimes rolling them out can become an easy way of getting more money – we can forget the reality of these boundaries and just what the real, felt, lived implications are for people. We need to be reminded sometimes and I think it's great to have a day like this to remind ourselves how massive and real the challenges are. And although our approach is in no way rocket science, and I'm sure is echoed by many arts organisations around the country, I will just repeat the core principles that I believe are absolutely key to overcoming some of these place related barriers, so that I can leave you in a place of values led engagement, and confidence that we can reach those who are undoubtedly, and for very good reason, difficult-to-reach. We must:

1. Make all work free at point of use
2. Help participants with expenses
3. Think through the logistics carefully and do your research (travel, safety etc.)
4. Work in unusual and community spaces: go to people, don't expect them to come to you
5. Work in genuine and respectful partnership with community and voluntary sector organisations
6. Work across divides of all types, remaining as neutral as possible
7. Support participants to cross thresholds (both physical and psychological)
8. Commit for the long-term and never undertake parachute projects

Thank you.