

Future  
Arts  
Centres

**Collaborative Commissioning  
Action Research Group**

August 2024





Z-ARTS FUN DAY  
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# Introduction

The Collaborative Commissioning Action Research Group (September 2023 - March 2024) was set up to build on the success of commissioning models developed in arts centres that are not traditionally seen as ‘producing houses’. Examples of these models include international working (building on Future Arts Centres Global-Vision programme experience) and multi-venue partnerships through to community commissioning, all leading to work that is more diverse, both in terms of the artists involved as well as the communities it reaches.

The purpose of the group was to:

- help develop sustainable ways of achieving artistic ambitions
- explore different potential collaborative commissioning partnerships, including between:
  - Arts centres
  - Other arts organisations
  - Non-arts organisations including private sector and voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations
  - Arts centres and their communities
- develop new commissioning models leading to the development of new work

For the purposes of this piece of work, the group adopted this definition of a commission:

**“Opportunity to create new work that is influenced by us (arts centres), communities, artists, partners (and whoever else)”**





Members were recruited via an Expression of Interest process and 10 were selected to provide a balance of scale and geography.

**artsdepot, London**

**Attenborough Arts Centre, Leicester**

**Brighton Dome and Brighton Festival**

**Colchester Arts Centre**

**The Dukes, Lancaster**

**Farnham Maltings**

**Old Diorama Arts Centre, London**

**Storyhouse, Chester**

**Unity Theatre, Liverpool**

**Z-arts, Manchester**

The group met six times, twice in person for longer sessions, and four times online.



# What happened?

The initial plan was to encourage the group to share their commissioning experience to date and set out their ambitions and scope for potential new collaborative commissioning models that they could pursue, either individually or together where interests overlapped. The time together over the following sessions would then be spent testing and refining these models, ready to implement when resources and timing allowed.

**“What happened was really interesting, and the group went on a journey.”**  
Z-arts

## Models

In the first session, we heard about the range of experience in the group and summarised the potential models of collaborative commissioning under the following headings:

- Place-based community-led/co-led commissioning
- Communities of need and/or identity
- Libraries
- Schools
- Young people
- Cross-sector partners (eg health, housing, VSCE)
- Other arts centres
- Single-artform organisations (ie not arts centres)
- For commercial purposes, ie selling skills/experience of commissioning to other people









## Benefits

In the second session, the group went on to explore the benefits of collaborative commissioning, which were summarised as:

- Providing access to artists not otherwise available to those venues/communities
- Overcoming (geographical) isolation
- Making something that is greater than the sum of its parts, ie bringing together the individual strengths of different partners to make the best work possible
- Supporting creative risk-taking
- Reducing risk, both financial but also artistic risk through pooling skills and expertise
- Providing leverage for finance, resources and expertise
- Increasing the distinctiveness of artistic programmes, through creating new work not yet seen elsewhere
- Allowing audience development to be embedded in the process, using commissioned work to drive audience development
- Addressing the difficulties of not seeing work before it is programmed
- Supporting arts centres who don't produce to increase their influence over what's available to them and their communities



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## Challenges

The group also identified the following challenges:

- Lack of honesty
- Partners with different ethos
- Reputational risks, particularly where the full scope of partner's experience is not known
- Money being the only focus
- Imbalances in partnership in terms of skills, resources
- Difficulties balancing process vs outcome, priorities may be different for different partners
- Later stages can get more difficult after a positive start
- Managing expectations
- Lack of audience development during process
- Working with young people to commission work for their own age group (usually want to commission work for older audiences)



## Power imbalances

One of the challenges that emerged during the discussions was the potential for power imbalances within collaborative commissioning processes. Not all partners would be bringing the same level of finance, resource, time and expertise.

The group identified some areas to consider in terms of acknowledging and addressing power imbalances. At the crux is the need to build trust between partners.

This list does not begin to address the power imbalances that result from the politics and context of protected characteristics (eg. race, gender, age...), which must also be addressed and influence dynamics.

- Budget
- Employment status
- Fees, and conditions for them
- Childcare and other caring costs
- Who is being paid?
- Volunteering or paid - and at what point should community volunteering become paid work?
- Ownership of the outcome, project, and the methodology of its creation
- Who the copyright belongs to
- Crediting
- Risks that people are taking - personal, professional, organisational, in their own communities
- Reputational risk
- Contracts - how much detail, and whether you hold people to them, and how you can hold people accountable (or don't want to)
- Co-ownership of onward use. Who has to be involved or have a say in future productions or iterations?
- Who has 'final say', on what, and what does that look like in practice?
- What if you can't reach an agreement?
- What to do when things break down?
- How do you enforce contracts that relate to money or employment status when there isn't enough money and they aren't employed in the future anyway?
- Values-led decision making has to take precedence.
- What happens when the process or methodology is the product? What are the key principles of the collaboration?





CHAPTER V

ORIENTATION AND ROUTE FINDING

THE question, How do birds find their way, is answered by many ingenious and often purely speculative theories, some of which have been already referred to in connection with the points discussed. Each theory, though it may apparently explain certain phases of migration, can be answered by some exceptional disability which makes it fail as a full explanation; we are driven to the conclusion that birds possess a sense of direction, which is often, very imperfectly, called Orientation. Biologically this sense does not imply any connection with the East, but is simply used to describe the power of finding the way back to a certain base, or of returning home. It is a power or sense which undoubtedly exists in many vertebrate animals and in some invertebrates, though it is hard, in many cases, to separate or distinguish it from memory and impression gained through eyesight. Meritt Burroughs, one of the strongest opponents of what he calls the "Sentimental School of Nature Study," gives in his "Ways of Nature" a striking instance of this faculty which may serve as a



## Key learnings and questions to ask

- The importance of establishing openness in conversations right from the start, even when not on the same page
- Communicate your red lines as clearly and early as possible
- Don't be afraid to talk about money, even when it is difficult
- Be clear about what you are investing: money, skills, capacity – and value it
- Be honest with yourself: what is the purpose of the commission and the relationship to your organisation?
- Identify what artists really need: is it just money?
- Recognise imbalances in collaboration to avoid a subservient relationship
- Clarify priorities for each partner at the beginning, particularly in terms of the value of the process and outcome
- Take time to share understanding of collaborative commissioning as a process
- Stage the process: agree to test an idea at R&D stage without making future commitments
- Enable genuine R&D, to support risk-taking knowing that not everything will work out
- Formalise the stages of development with all partners
- Articulate and agree the scale of the work; acknowledge if this changes during the process
- Recognise the need to know and understand potential audiences
- Agree where the audience will come into the process
- Build in a longer timeline, plan further ahead, especially when working with non-arts partners/statutory bodies
- Lay the ground in advance with new partners - how much time is needed even before you think about collaboratively commissioning?
- Build in time for reassurance and reporting throughout the process
- Understand collaborators' teams and decision-making processes
- How can we make sure this collaboration is truly collaborative, and not just a commission?
- How do we make sure agency is shared by everyone in this process? (Reference to BAC's [co-creating change agency scale](#))



## What happened next?

Having shared experiences, and reflected on some of the benefits and challenges, the next step was to think about models that individual members might take forward.

It became apparent at this point that although people had ideas they were keen to pursue, they were hitting barriers around capacity and resources. However, there was a really strong desire amongst the group to collaborate with other arts centres.

Colchester Arts Centre were keen to draw on the model of Here and Now, the FAC-led National Lottery 25th Birthday commissioning programme, which supported 40 arts centres across the country to respond, with their local communities, to a central brief developed by artists.

Old Diorama Arts Centre put forward an idea around commissioning small-scale interactive projects that respond to arts centres as places people visit and spend time in, outside of events or exhibitions. They recognised that often arts centre programmes were event-based, at specific times, and yet people spend time in our foyers and cafes. How could we provide artistic experiences for people that are just visiting our spaces to engage with?

The group coalesced around this idea, which has led to the development of a FAC-led application to the National Lottery Community Fund for £1.4m to support a shared commissioning programme across 30 arts centres.

The concept for the project is to explore how arts centres can work with their communities and each other to transform their public spaces (cafés, foyers and outside spaces), to create free, safe, and creative ‘third places’ for their local areas, accessible to all. The project will bring together local people, arts centre teams and artists, to co-design different approaches to transforming community spaces, exploring how these can be sustained over a longer period.

The project is funding dependent, with the outcome known by December 2024.



## Impact on organisations

Whilst the major outcome of the group is funding-dependent, there were other benefits for the participating members. On the following pages are some excerpts from stories captured from participants using the Most Significant Change methodology, which show some of the impacts of being part of the Collaborative Commissioning group for individual members.







“The group has sparked new thinking, allowing us to think more about commissioning and co-producing. And, crucially it’s given us permission to own some of those terms. Personally and organisationally, I think we’ve been shy about it. But now, we’ve got more confidence to know and talk about what we’ve got – the resources and the power we have and can share.

The important thing is for us to have more confidence as an organisation to make a new relationship and call ourselves a co-commissioning, co-producer. And to be open and vulnerable about the new co-producing journey, whilst also knowing our limits and being clear about the parameters. All of these approaches came from what we discussed in the first in-person session.

I can already see how this will ripple, and impact other artists. I think we’ll be looking to commission in a way where artists get different impact, we support their tours and funding opportunities. That’s new for us.”

“We’d all forgotten how to dream big. That comes with big responsibility and risk, but our job as Future Arts Centres is to dream big! People started dreaming big – collectively as a group. As soon as it happened, there were sparks. People sat up bigger, eyes wider and people wanting to speak.

Future Arts Centres is grand title. But it’s also what we started to be – we started as Future Arts Centres and then became local arts centres, so we had to remind ourselves about being future and bigger.

Internationalism isn’t a word we hear very often – but there are people connected to the world who are on our doorsteps. Now I’ve been really thinking about that. And thinking about the new ideas from the group and how it’ll allow us to make something could translate with a bigger scale, bigger vision, bigger everything – and be something to be really proud of.”





“Going to the meetings and along the whole process, it made me realise how many conversations we weren’t having as an organisation, the patterns of problems we’ve come up against, or just recurring issues. I realised we’re not looking at commissioning as a whole, just in pockets.

The beauty of the group was to come out of the working day and then, just by explaining things to others, things fell into place for me.

Like any retreat or time away with people who are related to your work, but separate from it – I could feel a shift in awareness of what’s possible, how we could connect better with artists and other people. Or maybe it feels like the change has been for me, and now it will also benefit the organisation. Certainly, I’ve come to realisations that I wouldn’t have otherwise.”

“It was good to have time to reflect on different experiences, models and funding. There’s such a lack of headspace in the daily job, so it’s nice to be able to usefully contribute to others’ thinking too. Continuing to build networks felt important, especially to connect to more FAC members.







## Impact for Future Arts Centres

In establishing the Action Research Groups in our first year as an independent, funded organisation, we wanted to set out with enough of a framework that everyone could understand what we were doing, whilst also allowing space for our work to be informed and influenced by the needs and interest of our members.

This group has been a great example of that approach – we started with some expected outcomes, but realised that there were barriers to achieving these, so responded to what we were hearing, supporting the group to head in a slightly different direction. The outcome was a brilliant idea, shared and informed by the group, that responds to a number of opportunities for arts centres – and connects to some of the other thinking we have been doing around arts centres as creative enterprises.

The experience has helped inform our approach for future work; to adopt a more flexible framework, less rigid in structure and more dynamic in building events and activities as we go, responding to what we are hearing. This is reflected in our activity planned for 2024/25, where we have identified some programme ‘strands’ or themes but chosen to only establish one formal Action Research Group.

The element of our work that members most value – reflected in the feedback from this group too – is the power of the collective to tackle isolation and build confidence.



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