

Best practice then and now



artsdepot (Finchley, North London) was one of 40 arts centres to take part in Here & Now, a national project where arts centres worked with artists and their local communities, as part of the National Lottery's 25th anniversary in 2020. Nick Cassenbaum and Olly Hawes of take stock exchange, an experienced community storytelling company, spent time with people throughout Barnet and created a podcast series to share their conversations.

Here and Now came at a time when we were trying to connect with targeted community groups.

So often, our work needs to be responsive to funding, and that can feel like it restricts who we're able to work with. But Here and Now allowed us to really be responsive to our communities and to work with people beyond any existing limitations. It gave us so much autonomy – creatively and who we were able to work with – which made it a really joyful experience for everyone. It gave us freedom and space to play.

We knew that Olly and Nick's work was relevant and interesting to us, and we wanted to work with them more.

The framework was quite open; our original plans did need to change a bit because of Covid, but it still allowed us to work with groups like young carers, the Labour party and – most excitingly – run a creative workshop for our staff.

The main change during the project was that, instead of an event and meal together, we created a podcast. It was fantastic to have something tangible to share. Usually our time gets swallowed up with planning and recruitment for projects, we don't always make time to shout about the good we do, but the podcast was an unexpected outcome which enabled us to share more widely, and it definitely had ripple effects.

I think the biggest lasting change is in our model and way of working – four years later, it's still shaping the way I talk to artists now. We had a really great alignment because the way that Nick and Olly worked is also the way we work, and we really wanted to strengthen our approach. I still frequently reference Here and Now as the best example of how we want to enable the development of community artists. Things like the way to engage with stories, ethics when using stories, approaches to pro-active listening and thoughtfully using the words of others. It's the clearest example I have of 'best practice' and I encourage the artists we work with to consider that approach, especially in terms of how to run workshops and community engagement.

There were other great consequences too – like, because we ran a staff workshop as a key part of the project, that also enabled a shortcut to better organisational understanding about more of our community work. The ways we worked for Here and Now also led to better relationships across our borough, which continue to strengthen. And it laid more foundations for other ways that we work now – like how we're increasingly outward-focused and ready to get out of the building.

But I think that the biggest long-term impact was that it's been an inspiring model of work of best practice. Even yesterday I cited it to artists as the clearest example of the way we want to work with our communities.

This Most Significant Change story was shared by Louisa Bartlett-Pestell, Director of Programming and Participation at artsdepot in North Finchley, in November 2024. Find out more about [You, Me, The World and Barnet](#) and [Most Significant Change](#).