

## APPG For Left Behind Neighbourhoods:

### The Role of Art and Culture in Regeneration.

#### Anna Francis presentation notes.

1. Hello, my name is Anna Francis, and I am Associate Professor at Staffordshire University, and a director of the Portland Inn Project in Stoke-on-Trent. The Portland Inn project is an Artist and Community led creative organisation based in one of Stoke-on-trent's most deprived neighbourhoods. We are an Arts Council National portfolio organisation and joined the portfolio in April 2023. I would like to just briefly give you a background to the neighbourhood where I live and work, to provide the context of my presentation today.
2. As a practising artist and researcher, I have been interested in the processes of regeneration. Since 2006 in particular, the Housing Renewal Programme Pathfinder, which impacted Cities in the Midlands and the north of England, and ran between 2002 and 2011, which has really informed a lot of my Practise based research. Back in 2006 when I was researching towards the curation of an exhibition called Indefinable City, which took place in a disused pottery works in the city of Stoke-on-Trent, I became fascinated by the processes of regeneration taking place across the city as a result of the Housing Renewal Programme. A number of neighbourhoods were impacted across the city. Community members in those areas had homes compulsory purchased with a view to demolish, to make way for new housing to be built in place of the mainly Victorian Terraced properties.
3. In some areas this meant an opening up of brownfield sites across the city, some of which have only recently been developed, however in a couple of the earmarked areas, the compulsory purchase process was slow and so in one neighbourhood close to the city centre, where I now live and work, by the time the scheme was scrapped in 2011, there were families living next door to boarded up homes and the resulting stripping of community infrastructure and the inhospitable street scene had created numerous issues. Image showing media coverage at the time the scheme was scrapped. The city council, having purchased 35 properties across 5 streets, needed to be imaginative about what to do to try to fix the residual issues, and announced the £1 home scheme. I don't have time to go into a lot of detail about that -
4. But just quickly, as an artist with a social arts practice, interested in the impact of regeneration on communities, my partner and I applied and were selected for the scheme. We would (as artists with fairly precarious incomes) have struggled to get a traditional mortgage so for personal reasons too, the scheme was appealing. Three stipulations that it is worth mentioning about the scheme: there was a cap on household income, households had to commit to live in the houses for 10 years, and had to contribute to community development. That last one, as an artist working across participatory and co-creative practices felt like something I could offer a lot to.
5. Soon after moving in I began a 3 year project, which was initially an art project to create a celebratory community ceramic plate to be used at community events, but really as an opportunity to talk to new neighbours about what worked and what needed work in the area— however. Within weeks of the project beginning (from a tent on the nearby green space, because the pub, shop and community centre were all boarded up) the community let me know loud and clear that while a community

ceramic may be nice, what we really needed was a permanent space of our own to programme community activity.

We began the Portland Inn Project in 2016 – to test if the community would like to take over the abandoned pub building – and as a way to start to be more in charge of how our community is talked about, as around that time the only media stories about our neighbourhood were very negative – focusing on Brexit, drugs problems and the collapsed regeneration pathfinder.

6. Initial questions and programmes focused on finding out what the community might want from the building, who should be involved and what might happen there. But importantly we have always had a focus (due to high levels of unemployment in the neighbourhood, and low levels of educational attainment) on skills development – to ensure the project is sustainable and to build agency and social and cultural capital in the community. One of the key aspects of the work, has been to recognise the need to slowly build trust with neighbours that we are in this work for the long haul, and to build up confidence to get involved and make the change we want to see happen.
7. In 2018 once the asset transfer of the pub building had been agreed with Stoke City Council, we tested what a community co-building process might look like.
8. We built a temporary space to work from, and for 4 weeks we ran a programme of activity, but importantly we set up an architecture school to redesign the pub building with the community.
9. The structure we built with Baxendale architects was shortlisted for a RIBA Macewen award, which recognises architecture for the common good, and was featured on the front page of the RIBA magazine. This was just one example of our community finding positive ways to tell our story to the outside world, and to shift the negative rhetoric usually applied to our neighbourhood.
10. In 2018 we became one of 15 areas Nationwide to be a part of the Creative Civic Change programme – a programme of funding and support to enable communities to shape, lead and commission creative interventions to make positive change where they live. For us, we had 4 main priorities for the 3 year funding. To strengthen our organisation, to secure a temporary space (while we continued to work towards the development of the pub building) to improve safety and security in the neighbourhood and to develop skills in the community. The 3 year funding was a real game changer for us, enabling us to become an established organisation, and to be able to run regular creative programmes which support our community. It also meant we were in a perfect position to apply to become one of Arts Council England's new National Portfolio Organisation's, which Rebecca Blackman from Arts Council is going to tell you all about next.
11. One of the projects growing out of Creative Civic Change (CCC) was our 100 year plan – which recognised that as a small community-based arts organisation, we need to build resilience into how we work – as due to the nature of our neighbourhood, the impact of external forces (for example covid, fuel poverty, the cost-of-living crisis) can be felt quickly and strongly for our community, which we, as a community based organisation can often find impacts on how we work. We realised that having a long term plan for positive change helps us to imagine the future together, but also to take a longer view even when in the short term urgencies occur.
12. CCC also allowed us to really look at how our community can formally contribute to decision making processes, and led to the setting up of a Community decision

making panel in 2018. This also sits alongside the services meeting which has been running since 2017, which brings together services that we work with in the area, for example, the police or the anti-social behaviour teams at the Council. Those meetings provide an opportunity to target resources where the neighbourhood really needs them – ensuring also that services can do their jobs and allowing us to do ours. These meetings are always action focused, with different members of the meeting identifying actions that need to be taken as a result of issues raised and then individuals owning the action, which is followed up on later.

13. Our youth club also get involved in setting their priorities which we can then programme around.
14. We are now underway with our Capital Project – to ensure we have the infrastructure locally to support the neighbourhood:
  - Planning permission granted in December 2020 building on the process since 2016 to ensure the work is properly embedded and community led.
  - Capital project started in October 2023 and is phased to enable us to get started with funding which has a time limit
  - CCC and NPO have equipped us to have the capacity to be able to apply for UKSPF and COF, but the timeframes
15. Our future building will represent our diverse community – and is part of our long term plan to start to transform this neighbourhood – our 100 year plan. In order to see long term change for our neighbourhood we have needed to be able to plan and think longer term, and so my plea is to recognise that funding and support should be longer term too – to ensure the work being done in neighbourhoods is meaningful
16. The past 8 months we have been part of a programme of peer learning led by Civic Square in Birmingham and Centric Lab with a cohort of people from across the UK, working in similar ways to us: addressing systemic inequities to communally create neighbourhoods that are life-sustaining, providing people and Nature with health, dignity, and justice. Recognising that by working at a neighbourhood scale, and involving residents in defining and then leading the change they want to see, work can be more sustainable and more impactful.

Communities need support to be able to build organisational capacity and resilience, to imagine and then enact a longer term future together. Alongside our Retrofit of a Victorian Building we are running a programme of skills development – The Neighbourhood Workshop. This enables us to look wider than the building at developing new hands on skills which can help us to retrofit the neighbourhood – as there is still a major issue locally with many of the houses being in a poor condition.
17. Any questions?