

**Who's Asking Case Study  
Davis & Jones with  
Wiltshire Youth Arts Partnership**



## Who's Asking Case Study

**Peter Tyas**

**Head of Arts & Culture, Wiltshire Council**

Local government and its partners are increasingly being called upon to address whole community issues. This is frequently beyond the capacity of services or agencies to respond to in isolation and so multi-agency approaches have become commonplace. This method of work requires innovation and creative thinking to be deployed in the design of partnerships and the reshaping of how services are delivered. The current and sustained downward pressure upon the resources available to deliver these services combined with this focus upon collaborative approaches has made the transformation of services and methods of work a necessity rather than an option. Inherent within this shift is the desire to test new ways of working and greater interest in innovative or untested methods as well as greater acceptance of taking risks.

Against this backdrop the arts sector has a lot to offer within the debate and delivery of change. The creative sector has skills, capacities and connectivity which can be of great use to support transformation within civic society and the services which seek to engage with the most vulnerable communities.

Arts practice has a long track record of supporting team building and fostering inter-agency dialogue, notably using creative methods

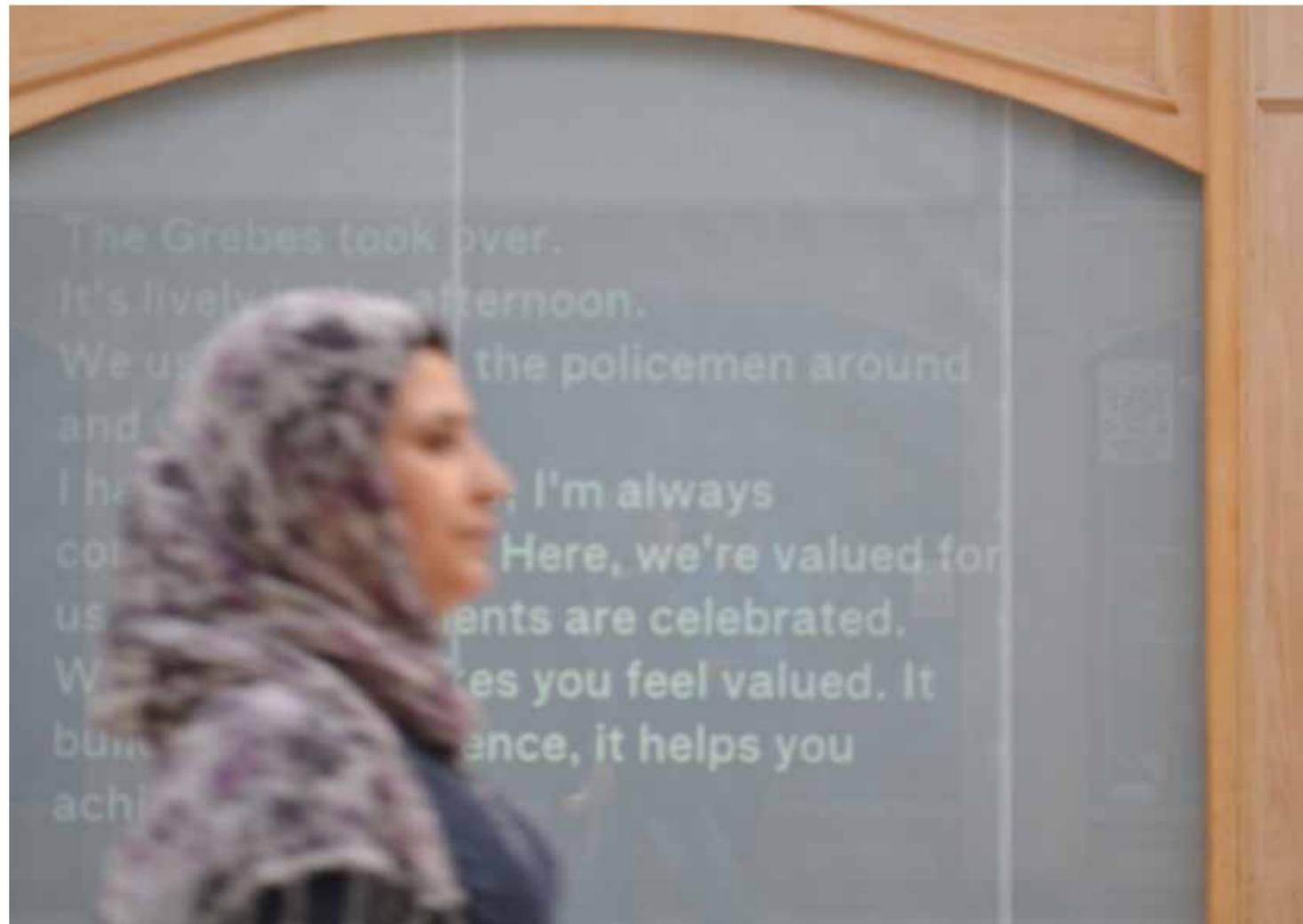
## Davis & Jones with Wiltshire Youth Arts Partnership



to enhance communication and enrich the personal relationships between key individuals. Arts practice can be used to understand the relationships between agencies' areas of responsibility and to reveal blind spots or areas of divergence. It is often these spaces between agencies that enable individuals or communities to fall through the gaps. The creative practice of artists can also be used to support agencies to evolve solutions, to reconsider what is established practice and to communicate with communities the necessity of change.

## Who's Asking Case Study

Artists have the capacity to directly engage communities in difficult subjects, notably to humanise debates which polarise communities and to amplify the voices of the least heard. There are many examples from around the world of arts programmes being used



## Davis & Jones with Wiltshire Youth Arts Partnership

to heal communities after catastrophic events or to build bridges between communities across sectarian and economic divides. The neutrality of the creative sector combined with the restorative power of joint endeavour has the potential to deliver transformation within communities beyond the scope of any agency or service.

The most potent capacity within the creative sector is its potential to transform lives and whole communities, often in such a way that their reliance upon support from local government is significantly reduced. The arts and health sector has demonstrated the capacity of creative activities to improve personal well being and resilience which makes individuals less dependent on costly medical interventions. This compares favourably with the prolonged use of many pharmacological or financial measures which often yield increasingly diminishing returns whilst the adoption of creative practice can be increasingly effective. The potential of the arts to affect change is being increasingly recognised at the policy level and the All Party Parliamentary Group on Wellbeing Economics recommends that "Local authorities should consider how cultural commissioning might contribute to priorities identified in their Health and Well Being strategies."(Page 7) And that "Local Authorities should use well being as an integral framework to join up public services." (Page 4).

## Who's Asking Case Study

**Carrie Creamer**

**Project Manager, Wiltshire Youth Arts Partnership (WYAP)**

WYAP focuses on creative interventions to support individuals and groups to find a voice and build re-silience in their lives and their communities.

Our role is to stimulate and deliver high quality transformative arts opportunities for 13-21 year olds in Wiltshire underpinned by local and national policy.

- Great Art and Culture for everyone- Arts Council England
- Wiltshire Youth Arts Charter- development of an effective strategic agreed way of working across Wiltshire- relating to quality, voice and safeguarding.
- Creating stronger and more resilient communities- Wiltshire Council business plan
- Wiltshire Children and young people's plan

It is exciting to explore how the arts can deliver outcomes relating to these formal frameworks.

## Davis & Jones with Wiltshire Youth Arts Partnership



**I love the Bandstand.**

One of the key outcomes of WYAP's work is social empowerment however we also aim to create work that:

- Explores people's relationship with each other and the world.
- Promotes thinking.
- Looks at how we communicate the unsaid and the said.

## Who's Asking Case Study

WYAP has an established relationship with the Wiltshire Council Early Help Service (previously Integrated Youth Service) and Courtmills Youth Centre working on many different projects with young people working with professional artists. There have been successes and failures and through this process as partners we have learnt a great deal about what works and why.

In commissioning Who's Asking? I wanted to be brave and take a risk in commissioning an artwork that would predominantly focus on finding the voice of young people who do not usually connect through formal channels. Our good relationship with partners was the starting point.

What was paramount within the project was how it engaged young people, developing relationships and conversations. Young people were intrigued by two artists talking to them, asking them questions and without a predetermined outcome.

Davis & Jones worked to engage participants in a playful way. Their practice is reflective allowing them to respond and develop their engagement as the project progressed. This shifted the focus to create an unusual social engagement.

## Davis & Jones with Wiltshire Youth Arts Partnership

In taking these risks Davis & Jones have created a work where young people's voice remains integral, this has been a breakthrough. Work can often fall down because of a tension between intended and unintended outcomes. In a space where young people's resources are limited and the potential for "voices" to become quieter, it is vital that this young person centred approach remains a focus.

## Who's Asking Case Study

### Davis & Jones

#### Artists

During 2013 Wiltshire Youth Arts Partnership had commissioned a series of socially engaged arts projects focused on engaging young people who were in challenging circumstances. There was a feeling that:

- Often the most interesting and beneficial part of the work was when young people simply engaged in conversation
- The benefits of the work only affected those who took part and didn't feed into a wider dialogue around young people's voice and engagement in wider society.

It was identified that a substantial number of young people never even make it through the door of an arts based workshop or intervention, they exist under a cloak of invisibility; not engaging in existing youth provision, nor having a voice.

Wiltshire Youth Arts Partnership (WYAP) invited us to work with them to devise *Who's Asking?* - an emergent project starting from our curiosity.

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## Who's Asking Case Study



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We asked ourselves:

- Can we work creatively with young people *within their everyday life*, basing the interactions on their starting points, their everyday experience, and making artworks from that?
- Can we create an intervention that interconnects the young peoples' personal and public/civic experiences?

We wanted to create an effective space for dialogue which included young people, asking:

*How can you be a part of dialogue in public space?*

*What conversations do you want to have?*

*Who do you want to have it with?*

Our approach was to:

- Performatively inhabit public spaces through low-key but memorable visual scenarios which would trigger dialogue with young people;
- Reflect, sense-make and create art with young people around these conversations
- Be consistently present over a period of time
- Avoid predetermined, instrumental intentions

## Who's Asking Case Study

## Davis & Jones with Wiltshire Youth Arts Partnership

We were interested in young peoples' experiences of territories and space, itinerancy, conversation, personal identity and public voice.

So, over the winter nights of 2013–14 we took hot chocolate and cakes out onto the streets of Trowbridge (with guidance from the Intergrated Youth Service Outreach Team), and had conversations with young people asking them about their lives and their places. We made notes from these conversations onto the clothes we were wearing.

Meeting regularly with the Trowbridge Youth Advisory Group, we reflected on these conversations. We invited a graphic designer to work with us and share examples of how contemporary artists have presented text into public spaces. Together with the young people, an idea was developed for the Random Story Generator which would mix and match all of the quotes from the clothes into over 300000 different stories about being here about being young in Trowbridge.

The Random Story Generator was launched at Trowbridge Town Hall, shown in public spaces around the town and is also visible at [www.randomstorygenerator.co.uk](http://www.randomstorygenerator.co.uk).

## Who's Asking Case Study

### Have you got permission?

**Chris Freemantle**

**Researcher and Producer working in public art**

It's not a question a lot of artists get asked. Davis & Jones were asked it by young people in Trowbridge because young people get asked that all the time. Davis & Jones went out into the town in the evenings to meet young people where they regularly hang out. They wanted young people to provide material for making art. What they were looking for were stories, experiences and opinions. They were willing to take risks: not personal safety risks, but risks in terms of not knowing the shape and content of the final work of art too early. Socially engaged practice has become increasingly significant over the past few decades. It involves making cutting edge works of art, working with people to tell stories and give voice to what is otherwise unsaid. Suzanne Lacy's ten years of projects in Oakland, California, are a key case study in this area of work. Those projects provided young people in that place with the opportunity to tell it the way they saw it, somewhat differently from the ways they were portrayed in the media. Lacy argues that the on the ground engagement process in the evenings where young people hang out is art just as much as the final event when the audience turns out to see the artwork.

## Davis & Jones with Wiltshire Youth Arts Partnership



## Who's Asking Case Study

The art historian Grant Kester, who has written extensively on socially engaged practices all over the world, draws our attention to some particular characteristics of this sort of work. He says,

In the most successful collaborative projects we encounter ... a pragmatic openness to site and situation, a willingness to engage with specific cultures and communities in a creative and improvisational manner ... , a concern with non-hierarchical and participatory processes, and a critical and self-reflexive relationship to practice itself. Another important component is the desire to cultivate and enhance forms of solidarity... . (*The One and The Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, Duke University Press, 2011, p125)

Davis & Jones wanted to work improvisationally. They didn't want to impose a preconceived project on the young people. They wanted to be open to the circumstances, to the young people and their own concerns.

One of the things autonomy allows the artist to do is to interrupt normal experience. Over those 10 evenings in Trowbridge, Davis & Jones did things that were normal and things that were intentionally different. Youth-workers usually go out with hot drinks and cakes.

## Davis & Jones with Wiltshire Youth Arts Partnership

Davis & Jones wore big Russian hats, bringing a humorous element to the situation. They carried a table which they ritually unpacked; making a production out of placing the flasks of hot chocolate and the cakes. They noted that they always had an abundance of cakes. Davis & Jones also said they were really careful to avoid a simple transactionalism: the young people didn't have to talk to them in order to get a cake. But when the young people did tell stories, and again Davis & Jones noted that asking for stories didn't work, these were written down by Davis & Jones on each other's clothes. Not on post-notes, not videoed, not recorded. This was serious listening, but it is also something that young people do to each other, for instance when they are leaving school. Davis & Jones wanted the shock and humour of adults doing it to each other, the challenge to what it's possible to do in public space.

Taking all these stories, experiences and opinions that young people had contributed, Davis & Jones presented them to the wider community using

Not change public space, but challenge it. Their work is an interruption. The personal becomes visible and public.

## Who's Asking Case Study



## Davis & Jones with Wiltshire Youth Arts Partnership

### Siobainn Chaplin

#### Team Leader, Integrated Youth Service, Wiltshire Council

Wiltshire Integrated Youth Service has a long running partnership with Wiltshire Youth Arts Partnership (WYAP). We've worked together in many different ways, with various artists, spanning artforms and groups of young people with varying degrees of success. Historically, the projects that have worked best have been responsive in the way they engage young people.

Working with Davis & Jones on *Who's Asking?* offered a way of engaging with groups of young people who do not usually get involved with organised activities, alongside a group of very engaged young people. It felt like a risk embarking on such an open ended process, but the strength of our ongoing relationship with WYAP made this feel possible and worth taking.

*Who's Asking?* was a campaign to put young people to the forefront, so they would be talking about what their needs and capacities were.

Nationally, the youth service is being cut so it is important to be mindful about how partnerships are forged to support young people. There are community groups who deliver good work with

## Who's Asking Case Study

young people but the concern will be to also support those who are particularly vulnerable.

The results of *Who's Asking?* in the form of the Random Story Generator were very accessible, surprising and intriguing, showing the importance of friendship circles and key locations with in Trowbridge. This has subsequently framed discussions in Trowbridge about young people and how the spaces are maintained. It was challenging for some people to witness the thoughts of these young people, but that's the importance of good young person centred work; it aims to deliver work that is true to the young people's voice.

What was unusual for us as Youth Workers was that in the form of the Random Story Generator these stories were viewed widely throughout the town and subsequently fed into wider discussions about young people and their places, resulting in changes to real world decisions.

## Davis & Jones with Wiltshire Youth Arts Partnership

This innovative project contributed to our commitments to work within various frameworks and standards including:

- National Youth Work Occupational Standards – 13 – 19 yr olds
  - ▶ Key values
  - ▶ Participation and active involvement.
  - ▶ Key element – work stating to where yp are in relation to their own values, views and principles as well as their own personal and social space. Page 5
- 2009 education act section 507B done in 2011; Positive Activities
  - ▶ Additional paper for positive activities for young people. About quality rather than numbers; young people having voice, having a space.
- New Ofsted report, Early Help part; at present, for every £1 spent on preventative, £4 is saved on reactive work. Because of the way it engages young people, this type of work is able to address issues before they escalate.
- Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB and, in Wiltshire, WSCB); by meeting vulnerable young people on a weekly basis, building trust and confidence, then feeding issues back into the system, *Who's Asking?* helped to meet responsibilities issued by government that every local authority has to have an effective safeguarding board.