ART AT HEART

A toolkit for integrating artists and communities in library spaces

art school plus

ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND
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Hackney

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FOREWORD

This project has been a pivotal cultural intervention for us here in Hackney, and we are excited to share our insights with other local authority libraries and cultural services through this toolkit.

The initiative was born from several inspirations, all aimed at transforming Hackney's libraries into vibrant hubs of creativity. One key moment came during a visit I made to libraries in Norway and Finland in 2021, which sparked a vision for what our own spaces could become. Equally inspiring were the conversations I had with Ella Snell, Director of Art School Plus, who co-produced this project. Together, we were eager to begin by providing artists the opportunity to explore library spaces through research, training, and residencies focused on public art.

This project, Art at Heart, was designed in direct response to feedback from 8,500 residents who expressed their desire for libraries to evolve into centres of creativity. Over the summer, this initiative brought libraries to life through artistic takeovers, while also training and supporting early-career artists with paid residencies. By working closely with the community, these artists developed concepts for integrating public art into our library spaces.

A key strength of this project has been offering artists from diverse backgrounds the time and freedom to engage in research, rather than confining them to a predesigned library setting. From textile art and glassware to book design, outdoor sculptures, and digital installations, the artists produced a vibrant and varied tapestry of proposals. A particular source of inspiration has been our collaborations with Shape Disability Arts and the Vietnamese commission, both of which have helped bring underrepresented groups into our libraries.

Image Credit: Kat Hudson

During the training week, it was a privilege to work alongside award-winning artists and curators such as Ingrid Pollard, Adele Patrick, Olivia Plender and Anna Colin who brought their deep passion for Hackney's stories. Their expertise was invaluable in guiding the artists as they integrated their work into our library spaces.

I would like to extend special thanks to my colleagues Emily Jost, Catherine De Abaitua, Emma Winch and Andrew Ellerby, whose expertise in libraries and culture were instrumental in supporting this project and selecting the artists for residency.

On behalf of Hackney's Library Service, I also want to express my gratitude to our funders and to Emily Jewell at Arts Council England, for making this exciting partnership between the local authority and the artist network possible.

I hope this toolkit, meticulously produced by researcher Stella Toonen, will offer valuable insights and inspire meaningful discussions, no matter where you are on your journey.

Petra Roberts

Assistant Director for Culture, Libraries and Heritage
Hackney Council

INTRODUCTION

This toolkit explores how artists can be integrated into library spaces and shares tips and best practice for artist and library collaborations. It takes learning from 'Art at Heart', a new exploratory programme in which ten early-career artists spent time at Hackney Libraries to help bring art into libraries. The initiative is led by Hackney Council in collaboration with Art School Plus, and funded by Arts Council England.

Art at Heart is a project born from the aspirations of over 8,500 Hackney residents who envision their libraries as vibrant hubs of cultural engagement, co-created with the community. This initiative aims to transform Hackney's cultural landscape by integrating artists and communities into the borough-wide redevelopment of its libraries. This is a significant step towards embedding culture into libraries and provides a unique opportunity for artists to create and collaborate in new and unconventional spaces.

The initiative consisted of a training week, followed by ten three-day artist placements across four different libraries in Hackney.

The training week featured guest speakers including award-winning artists **Ingrid Pollard** and **Olivia Plender**, and was facilitated by artist, feminist and co-founder of the **Glasgow Women's Library**, **Dr Adele Patrick**. The **MFA Curating** course at Goldsmiths, University of London additionally provided two early-career curators with a specialism in socially engaged and public art to act as advisers and peers to the artists.

Disability-led arts organisation **SHAPE** also joined the collaboration to break down barriers in culture and to involve their network of disabled creatives in reimagining the library as a vibrant place of community, expression and imagination.

INTRODUCTION

During the placements the artists observed Hackney's library spaces, undertook research and proposed (and in most cases piloted) ways artmaking can bring about positive impacts and change in specific locations, communities and teams. Informed by the institutional knowledge and specialisms of the Hackney Libraries team, the aim was that artists would propose ways that art could improve the libraries in terms of their buildings, what they offer to their communities, and by bringing their resources to the fore.

The placements resulted in a series of proposals for artistic interventions that might be implemented at Hackney Libraries.

Art at Heart is keen to test and share best practices around integrating artists and communities into public library spaces. This aims to meet a sector-wide need for a more detailed bank of case studies of projects of artists working with public libraries. This toolkit therefore shares our learning and gives recommendations to those interested in bringing artists into their library spaces.

Image Credit: Sean Pollock

INTRODUCTION

✦ Hackney Libraries Service

Hackney Council runs eight libraries and a Community Library Service - its membership is open to anyone and allows customers to borrow stock, to use the computers and participate in cultural, learning and community focused activities. Information on all Hackney Libraries can be found on Love Hackney. The libraries strategy for Hackney 2022 to 2026 is a vision for what the borough's library service aims to achieve over the four years. It responds directly to what residents said they wanted for their libraries. View libraries strategy for Hackney 2022 to 2026 here.

✦ Art School Plus

Art School Plus trains and supports the culture sector and artists to develop unique art projects. They act as a bridge between artists and projects, supporting the cultural sector and artists with the skills and knowledge to develop mutually beneficial relationships in distinctive contexts. Art School Plus are motivated in this work because they want to champion the role of the artist within a wider social context, as well as support a true diversity of voices and perspectives to feel empowered to develop work and projects.

✦ Arts Council England

Arts Council England (ACE) is the national development agency for creativity and culture. ACE has set out their strategic vision in Let's Create that by 2030 England will be a country in which the creativity of all is valued and given the chance to flourish and where everyone has access to a range of high quality cultural experiences. ACE invest public money from the Government and The National Lottery to help support the sector and to deliver the vision.

II: HOW WE RESEARCHED THIS PROJECT

Image Credit: Sean Pollock

HOW WE COLLECTED THE DATA

This toolkit uses learning from the Art at Heart project to challenge perceptions about what impact artists can make in library spaces. It shares insights about how artists and libraries might collaborate to engage library audiences and propose innovative use of library spaces and resources.

Literature review

... of existing good practice and comparable examples across Hackney and in other libraries.

Document analysis

... of the project bid, artist recruitment documentation, **press release,** communication materials, activity schedules, audience numbers, **Hackney Council's Libraries Strategy**, as well as the project proposals produced by the artists at the end of the project.

Observation

... of team meetings, an induction Q&A session for artists, an expectations setting session for the project team, training course sessions, and accounts of the residencies and workshops held.

Surveys

... through feedback forms and feedback videos from artists at the end of their training and again at the end of their residencies.

Interviews

... with five artists, six members of Hackney Libraries staff, and two project organisers, as well as through a reflection focus group at the end of the training week.

HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT

Part III

Offers a short contextual insight into the potential for collaborations between artists and libraries and how Art at Heart fits into this wider landscape.

Part IV

Outlines all elements of how this project was run, with short recommendations on what worked best.

Part V

Offers deeper learning about how artist-library collaborations can be set up in the most impactful way and might create a legacy for the library sector.

III: THE ART AND LIBRARIES CONTEXT: OUR STARTING POINT

Image Credit: Sean Pollock

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THE ART AND LIBRARIES CONTEXT

In September 2024, <u>BBC research</u> showed that since 2016, more than 180 libraries in the UK have closed their doors or been handed over to volunteer groups. This equates to one in 20 public libraries being lost, while communities with high levels of deprivation were four times more likely even to have lost their local library.
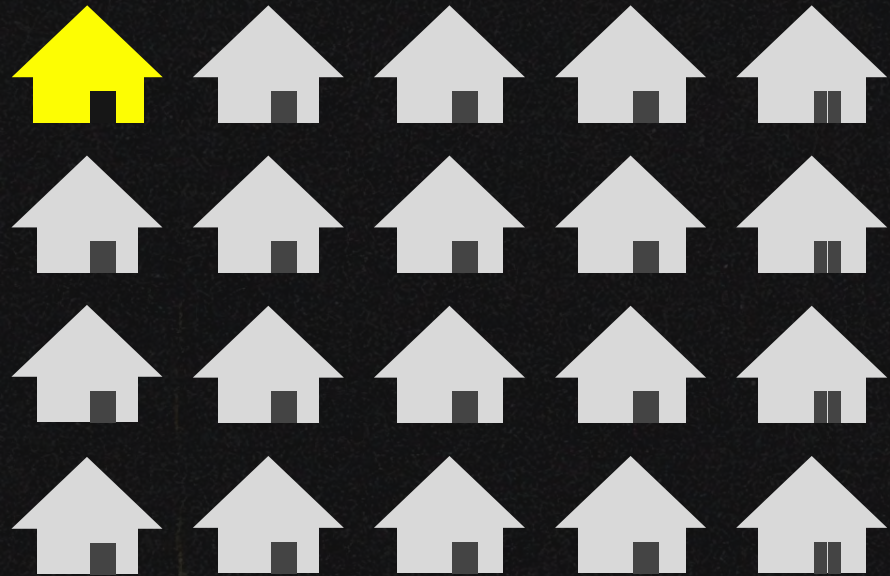
THE ART AND LIBRARIES CONTEXT

This crisis for public libraries stands in stark contrast to their popularity. According to CIPFA, library visits went up by 71% between 2021/22 and 2022/23, and the number of books borrowed also went up by 24% during that time.

71% ↑
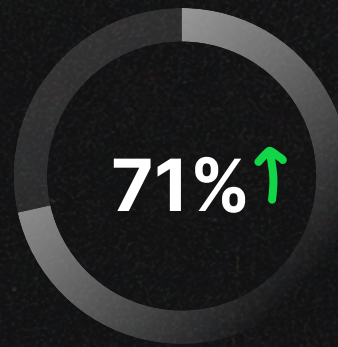
VISITS

Between 2021/22 and 2022/23

24% ↑
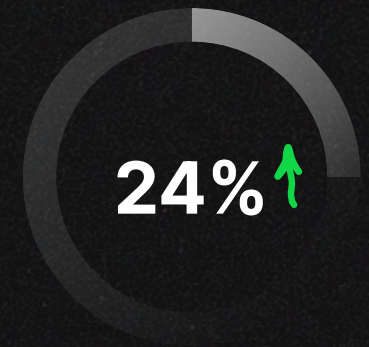
BOOKS BORROWED

Between 2021/22 and 2022/23

THE POWER OF BRINGING ART INTO LIBRARIES

The growing demand for libraries is partly explained by increased needs due to the cost-of-living crisis, but also by libraries' expanding services. Going beyond mere book-lending, many council-run libraries offer facilities and services such as warm havens, education programmes, play sessions for children, literacy clubs, and access to computers. In some cases, they offer arts programmes too, for which there seems to be a great demand, despite limited funding.

Indeed, feedback from around 8,500 Hackney residents revealed that many would like to see more exhibitions, **art and creativity** in their libraries. This 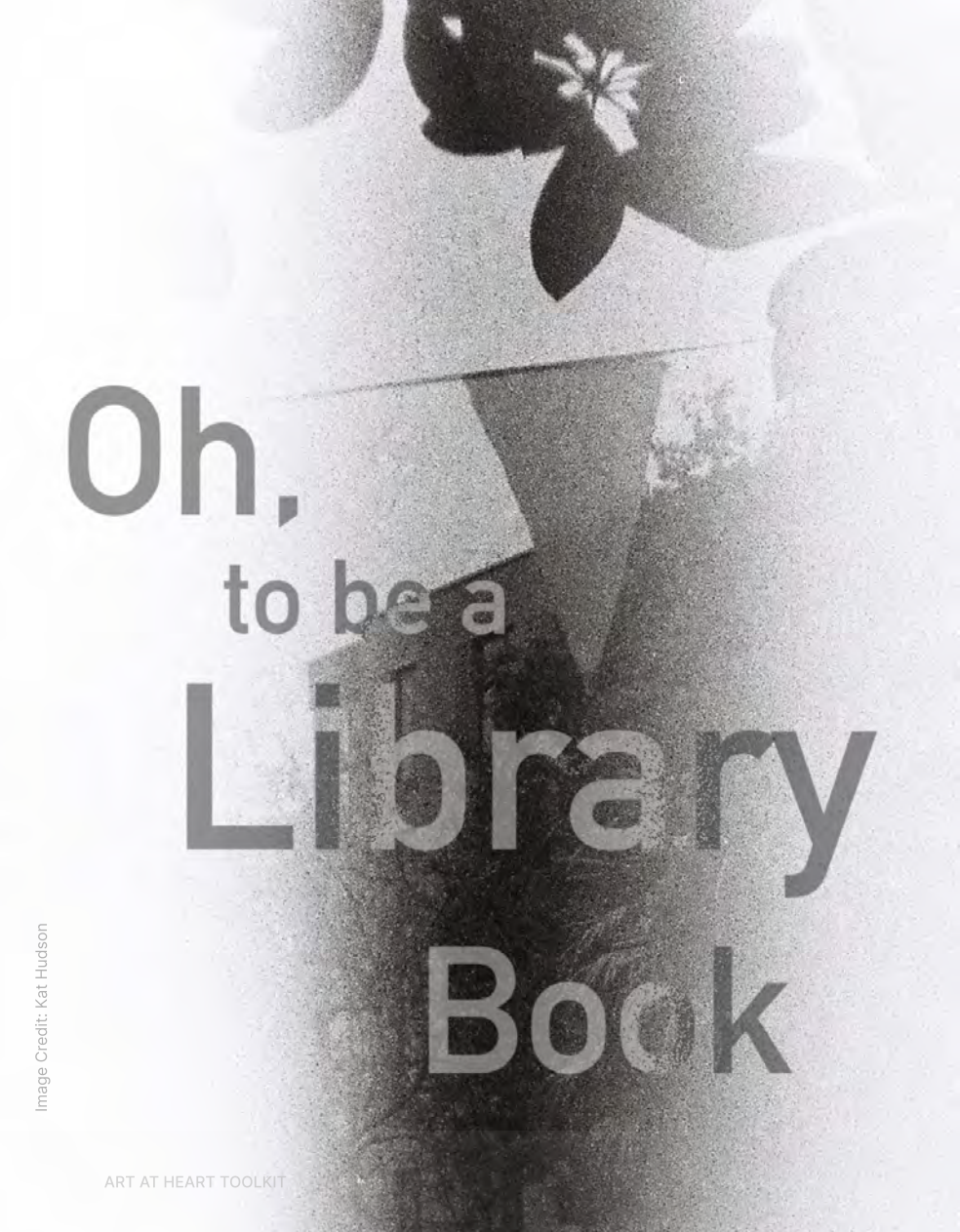then informed the objectives of Hackney's libraries strategy, which focus on promoting creativity, reading and lifelong learning, digital inclusion, volunteering and participation, and engaging with vulnerable people and communities throughout the borough.

Hackney Councillor Chris Kennedy, Cabinet Member for Culture, explains: "When we asked residents what they wanted to see in their local library, they told us that they wanted to use library spaces for creative and community activities. So we're delighted to help develop the talents of artists and use libraries to provide a platform to showcase their work through Art at Heart."

Unlike financial, health or education services, culture programmes are often seen as less vital for councils and are therefore constantly decreased or cut. The project team realised this often left library services with "deep, profound demoralisation" and were keen to leverage the "hope, passion, commitment" that the Hackney Libraries team felt about Art at Heart to propose an example where cultural literacy is embedded into council strategy. They hope that Art at Heart can be "exemplary" to help convince "politicians, council officials and those that have got the purse strings to really get what libraries might need."

Art at Heart aims to inspire wider **change** across the library sector. With dwindling budgets, public libraries have to be creative about how to work with art and artists efficiently, and cannot usually afford to spend a lot of time researching or experimenting with new approaches. Sharing the learning from Art at Heart might help these libraries to build on a model tested through action learning.

Image Credit: Sean Pollock

Oh,
to be a
Library
Book

"Art at Heart exemplifies our commitment to transforming public spaces into vibrant cultural hubs. By integrating artists and communities into the redevelopment of Hackney's libraries, we're not only enriching the community's engagement with the arts but also setting a precedent for how libraries can serve as dynamic centres for creativity.

This initiative is a crucial way of demonstrating how to embed culture into public spaces, and we're excited to see the lasting impact it will have on both the local community and participating artists."

BUILDING ON EXISTING ARTIST-LIBRARY COLLABORATION MODELS

Although across the library sector there is an interest in working with artists, the project team also noticed there are few case studies available that share learning about best practices in this field. In response, the research for Art at Heart has involved collecting examples of different artist-library collaboration models, to offer a range of examples of what shapes such collaborations might take.

This case study bank is an open resource, which anyone across the library sector is invited to contribute to. The hope is that this can give a more complete sense of the opportunities that exist to bring artists into libraries. This might then also help organisations to innovate these models or combine them in ways that are tailored to what their specific library or audience needs.

The case study bank of artist-library collaborations is available **here**
To contribute a case study, fill out the form **here**

CASE STUDIES

The first iteration of this case study bank includes examples of the following models of how artists and libraries have worked together across the UK and beyond:

Artistic programming

- Exhibitions in libraries: British Library
- Arts and crafts groups and workshops: Chicago Public Library
- Writing groups and workshops: Hackney Libraries
- Touring artworks to libraries: Old Library, Trinity College Dublin

Artistic commissions

- Public artwork commission: Austin Central Library
- Site-specific performance commission: New Haven Free Public Library
- Digital engagement commission: Gloucestershire Libraries
- Spatial design commission: Glasgow Women's Library

Residency schemes

- Artist-in-residence: London Library and Dorset Libraries
- Writer-in-residence: Gladstone Library
- Translator-in-residence: Czech Literary Centre at the Moravian Library
- Researcher-in-residence: National Library of the Netherlands
- Environmentalist-in-residence: Suffolk Libraries

Libraries as art-making spaces

- Artist studio space: Hackney Libraries
- Performance or rehearsal space: Deptford Lounge
- Maker space: Dokk1 Library, Aarhus
- Media space: Tabakalera, San Sebastian
- Item lending libraries: Library of Things, London

CASE STUDIES

Education and training

- Artist placements: Hackney Libraries
- Librarian placements: Library of Congress
- Opportunities for students: UWE Bristol University Library

Community engagement

- Co-curation of exhibitions: Newham Libraries
- Co-creation of artworks: Nottinghamshire Libraries
- Co-creation of libraries: Public Library of Amsterdam

Artist collections

- Arts library: Brierfield Library
- Sketchbook library: Brooklyn Arts Library

Image Credit: Kat Hudson

ART AT HEART: EXPLORING A NEW MODEL

A unique combination of multiple models

Art at Heart was a unique project that combined multiple of the artist-library collaboration models above. It combined elements of artistic and research residencies through its three-day placement model, but also of a public art commissioning scheme through its aim to gather proposals for creative interventions, as well as of a training scheme through its partnership with Art School Plus and Goldsmiths University. Together this made up a complex multi-stakeholder project design, aiming to create benefits for all of those involved.

Image credit: Hackney Council, 2019

A UNIQUE COMBINATION OF MULTIPLE MODELS

Because of this complex model, Art at Heart was not initially pitched as an 'artist-in-residence' project in the funding application, but some of the stakeholders referred to it as one. This helped to define some of the expectations, even if the actual placements were only three days long, which is much shorter than most residency projects.

However, the final output the artists were expected to produce was a proposal for a work, rather than a full site-specific artwork, and the project featured a strong learning aspect through its training week, and so in a way the project is perhaps better described as an **exploratory research placement** than an artist-in-residence scheme.

Moreover, the nature of this project was very open-ended. Instead of writing out a specific commission, the library "commissioned them [the emerging artists] to come up with a proposal" so that it could make use of their creativity and their fresh eyes on the space. Being hypothetical in the first instance, these proposals were not restricted by practical limitations or criteria. In a way, it was an **idea development** exercise mixed with a **professional development** programme to create innovation and capacity within the library and wider creative sector.

What makes Art at Heart unique from other artist-library placements, according to the organisers, was the partnership between libraries, artists, communities, and training providers. They argue that working with an arts school in particular helps to develop both the creative as well as the library sector:

Image credit: Hackney Council, 2019

"I think it's incredibly important that they're early career artists, because I think we're then nurturing the cultural sector and creating creative growth in the borough, nurturing the next generation, and getting more and younger people involved in libraries as well."

A UNIQUE COMBINATION OF MULTIPLE MODELS

Art School Plus fills a niche that combines professional development training for artists with opportunities to work in public spaces as well as on community engagement projects.

Its partnership programmes allow each training week or session to be tailored to the needs of all partners and the specific group of artists. This then means that the organisation does not only broker an opportunity for work for its artists and a programme of arts activities for the libraries involved, but also a high-quality training programme that the artists can apply directly to their commissions as well as to future work in the long term.

By additionally partnering with Goldsmith's **MFA Curating**, the project also offered a training opportunity for two current students on the programme to apply their curation skills to a live multi-stakeholder project.

AIMS OF THE 'ART AT HEART' PROJECT

Image credit: Art School Plus

Support

To support libraries to be more deeply connected to the community, offering the Universal Offer of creativity that benefits the entire community. The creative and cultural idea driving Art at Heart is to integrate socially engaged and co-curated art practice into library spaces, creating new ways to engage creatively for library visitors.

Nurture

To nurture a thriving creative community of artists. It will provide artists with skills to work in the public realm, especially working with communities and public buildings, and to sustain their careers via training and support.

Inform

To inform the development of a sector-first toolkit focusing on how artists might work in library spaces to be shared with local authorities, libraries services, artists and arts bodies across the country.

IV: ART AT HEART:
WHAT WE DID

Image Credit: Sean Pollock.

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BUILDING A PARTNERSHIP

Project initiation and obtaining funding

Art at Heart was initiated through conversations between Hackney Council's Libraries Service and Art School Plus, in which both partners were looking to build collaborations between artists and public libraries that would include opportunities for learning and nurturing talent. Hackney Council was following the directions of their residents, who through consultation had expressed a desire to see local libraries as dynamic centres for cultural engagement, and was keen to integrate artists and communities into the capital redevelopment of some of their libraries.

The project also fit Art School Plus' mission of training up artists to develop unique socially engaged practices for working in the public realm. Both partners aspired to make a lasting impact on the cultural practices of individuals (the artists), groups (local communities), and organisations (public libraries).

Image Credit: Sean Pollock

Image Credit: Sean Pollock

PROJECT INITIATION AND OBTAINING FUNDING

The project was funded through an Arts Council project grant, with Art School Plus taking the lead on writing the bid. Hackney Council's Strategic Service Head for Culture, Heritage and Libraries was involved in shaping the focus, but the rest of the library team had limited capacity to get involved.

This raised the question of whether the project design focused on what artists would need from the project or on library users' needs. It underlined how allowing enough time to develop the bid could help to bring in the expertise of library staff and experience of library users more.

✦ TIP

Already at the bid writing stage, the voices of all stakeholders need to be represented in the project design, to ensure it meets everyone's expectations, achieves all relevant aims, builds in all stakeholders' values, and creates benefits for all of those involved.

BUILDING A PROJECT TEAM

As part of the bid preparations, Art School Plus led on putting together the project team, which included (representatives from):

Hackney Libraries' Engagement and Development team to host the placements

Further support from Hackney Libraries' Library Officers and Front of House team on the artist placement days

Independent and library staff guest speakers to feature in the training week

An independent researcher/ evaluator to produce the toolkit

Hackney Libraries' Communications and Marketing team to promote and document the project

A course facilitator to run the training week

Hackney Council's wider Culture and Heritage teams to join the steering group

A project manager from Art School Plus to produce the training week and manage the wider project

Image Credit: Kat Hudson

BUILDING A PROJECT TEAM

In addition to this, the project team recruited:

10 Ten artists for the placements, of which eight were Art School Plus alumni, one was a Vietnamese artist selected by Hackney Archives and An Viet Project, and one was an artist with lived experience of disability selected by SHAPE.

2 Two curators from Goldsmith's MFA Curating programme.

As is shown by the list, the project team included a wide range of professionals who came to the project from different angles, bringing **different expertise and experience**.

Having staff from different Hackney Council teams helped to create buy-in across the wider directorate, and those on the project team made sure to cascade down information to their frontline library staff teams, to ensure the commitment to the project extended onto the library floor.

The guest speakers were mainly involved during the training part, whereas the course facilitator and evaluation roles were quite embedded throughout the project.

BUILDING A PROJECT TEAM

One of the project organisers noticed about the team that there was a strong openness and commitment to working out the complexities of an experimental, multi-stakeholder project. They explain:

"When you're going through an intense learning period, sometimes it requires such a leap of faith, because some of the strands only start unfurling afterwards."

This shared courage across the project team was a prerequisite for ensuring the project provided new insights, learning and experimental value.

Image Credit: Kat Hudson

✦ TIP

A strong project team includes a wide range of people from all stakeholder organisations and departments. This creates buy-in across the organisations involved, but also makes the most of the expertise everyone brings.

EXPECTATION SETTING

Before the project kicked off fully, staff from across the library came together for a session around expectation setting to help anchor and clarify the **aims of the project** and its **way of working**. This session was facilitated by course leader Dr Adele Patrick and largely focused on two sets of questions:

What makes for a positive creative collaboration? And how does that feel?

- The session showed that the stakeholders valued the following practices as exemplary for good collaborations: *"Generosity, questioning, openness, shared goals, good communication, great ideas, mutual value, innovation, empathy challenge, and trust."*

- They mentioned that these practices would then result in the following feelings: *"Fulfilled, happy, confident, supported, feeling heard, encouraged, passionate, and a sense of achievement."*

EXPECTATION SETTING

What are the things that mean a collaboration fails? And how does that feel?

- **The stakeholders listed the following bad practice behaviours:** *"Fear about asking questions, lack of communication, poor communication, not listening, misunderstandings, unclear responsibilities, lack of flexibility, lack of core planning, lack of joint vision, misunderstood goals."*

- **The feelings that would come with those practices were listed as:** *"Upset, flat, disappointed, frustrated, guilty, disheartened, and deflated."*

Going over those expected ways of working helped the staff group to feel more aligned. One library staff member commented at the end of the session:

"I think I just didn't have enough clarity before, but that's because we hadn't sat down and had this conversation. So to have it now, and have it facilitated, I think, has got us further on."

Image Credit: Kat Hudson

Image credit: Art School Plus

EXPECTATION SETTING
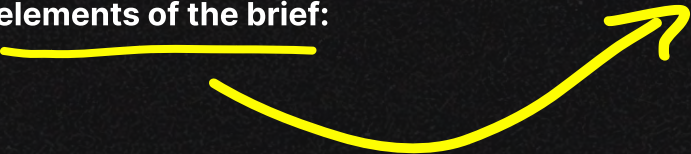
The outcomes of this session were then also shared with the artists on their first training day, and their input was added to it. This helped to set expectations of a shared collaborative practice and to build trust. The course facilitator, who led both sessions, explained how these sessions helped all collaborators to see *"that we're all human beings and we all feel passionately and strongly and committed to doing our best and doing work that's important to us and to others. It's about getting that sense of trusting that everyone else has positive intentions about the project, and wants it to be a success for essentially the same users."*

If they were to run this session again, the team says they would integrate the expectation setting sessions for the project team and for the artists into one. This would have helped the staff to see how they might be able to support the artists better, and the artists to see what expertise the staff already had that they could build on. It could also have provided space to show the creative engagement work that already happens at the library.

✦ TIP

Taking time to set expectations together between all collaborators seems vital to build trust, set clear aims, and share existing learning, which all lead to better outcomes. Sharing these expectations between staff, artists, curators and the wider project team helps to make sure everyone is on the same page from the start.

THE ARTIST BRIEF AND RECRUITMENT

The artist and curator brief

The artist brief summarised the training and residency offer to artists and curators, to which they could respond with an application. This brief was shaped by team members from across Hackney Libraries and Art School Plus, through a session facilitated by course leader Dr Adele Patrick. This session looked at defining the key five **elements of the brief:**

The aims, the values, and ambitions of the project

The behaviours, practices and guiding principles expected to be shared by all stakeholders, including around collaboration and working with communities

What Hackney Libraries can and can't provide

What artists and curators should be prepared to bring to the project

The details, fees, and programme of the training and residency phases

THE ARTIST AND CURATOR BRIEF

In addition to the points above, the stakeholders also agreed upon two **eligibility criteria**, to tailor the applicant pool to who would benefit from the opportunity most:

> Artists had to be emerging professionals with less than 10 years of experience within their practice approximately.

> Artists with a strong connection to Hackney were particularly encouraged to apply, however this was not a mandatory requirement.

Art School Plus guidance on **how to write an artist brief** shows that a strong brief conveys clarity, practicality and inspiration, and should incorporate information on the artistic area (defining the ask to the artists), budget, timeframe, and the project's values to give the best possible sense of what to expect.

Moreover, any brief should consider **access and inclusion** considerations to ensure all eligible artists can apply without barriers and have an equal chance in being selected. Examples might be to allow applications in video or audio format, and to minimise the unpaid workload of the application process itself, as well as any budget for access costs for those who are successful. As this project included a partnership with disability-led organisation SHAPE, they could feed into best practice recommendations based on their expertise.

Finally, the Hackney Libraries team held an online **Q&A session for prospective artists** to offer them time to ask questions about the project and get to know the different libraries in Hackney. This clarified some of the expectations and helped the artists to get a sense of how their interests might connect to the available spaces and opportunities within them.

Image Credit: Sean Pollock

✦ **TIP**

Make sure your artist or curator brief conveys clarity, practicality and inspiration, and also considers access and inclusion to give all applicants an equal chance.

ARTIST AND CURATOR RECRUITMENT

The criteria

The artists were recruited in different ways. Eight of the ten spaces on the programme were open to previous Art School Plus alumni, one was reserved for a Vietnamese artist selected by Hackney Archives and An Viet Project, and one was reserved for a disabled or neurodiverse artist through sponsoring from **SHAPE**. The two curator spaces were open to students from the **MFA Curating** degree at Goldsmiths.

These criteria gave fairly narrow eligibility window and as a result, 18 applications were received across the different categories. Selection was made on the basis of five **selection criteria**:

Selection criteria

WHETHER THEIR...
✦ Application demonstrated that they had relevant interests and motivations for the opportunity.

WHETHER THEY...
✦ Showed experience and commitment to community engagement.

WHETHER THEY...
✦ Showed experience or future potential to site-specific working.

WHETHER THEIR...
✦ Application demonstrated areas of benefit for the artist and/or the community.

WHETHER THEIR...
✦ Application showed a meaningful relationship to Hackney and its communities.

Image Credit: Sean Pollock

ARTIST AND CURATOR RECRUITMENT

The process

The recruitment process was led by Arts School Plus. This ensured a high application standard, but also offered a different selection from the artists that Hackney Libraries usually work with. The library usually works with local artists from within the borough and largely those from communities underserved in Hackney, whereas the candidate pool for this project mainly featured art school graduates from all over London. This was a new approach for the library that offered space for fresh perspectives.

Group numbers

Art School Plus usually works with cohorts of ten artists in each training week to offer diverse experiences and opportunities for peer-learning. The artists felt this group size worked well for the training programme indeed, even if there was some discrepancy in experience with eight of the artists having completed a training week with Art School Plus before, while two were entirely new to the art school.

✦ TIP

The selection criteria for artists or curators will influence the perspectives that are represented, so make sure they suit your values and aims for the project.

GROUP NUMBERS

However, having ten artists doing placements leads to budget pressures that mean many artists will all have very little time in the space. With the placements focused on offering research time, three days per artist was enough to explore the libraries or run a pilot activity to inform new proposals for interventions in the space. However, library staff used to longer residency projects noted that fewer artists with more time allocated each could *"build up a programme of things, even a mini programme, of three or four weeks or something. If you have, say, three or four sessions, you can build up over time, and you can kind of learn and tweak and see what happens."*

This highlights a balancing act between creating space for fresh perspectives by allowing artists to briefly dip into unknown settings versus creating deeper engagement that avoids *"piloting someone in and taking them out again without any real impact"*, as one of the staff members put it. This balance depends on the aims of the programme and whether it hopes to test new ideas or build sustainable engagement.

Image Credit: Sean Pollock

✦ TIP

The size of the artist cohort determines the depth of engagement that the budget allows for. It is important to strike a balance based on the project values and needs of all partners.

THE TRAINING WEEK

The programme

The partnership with artist network and training provider Art School Plus meant that the Hackney Libraries placements were preceded by a five-day intensive training week for the artists involved. Facilitated by artist, feminist, and Glasgow Women's Library Director Dr Adele Patrick, this week was focused on building three types of expertise:

Artist-library understanding

- Tours of the different public libraries in Hackney
- Exploring the library context through different kinds of mapping and walking
- Guest speakers highlighting their own work with libraries and in the public realm, including artists Ingrid Pollard, Olivia Plender, Caroline Gausden, and Ali Eisa, as well as curator Anna Colin

Project development time

- Curatorial session
- Reflection time and group feedback sessions modelled on art school 'crit' sessions
- A one-to-one session with the project manager to plan next steps for the placement after the training week
- A one-to-one session with one of the curators to plan the placement and think about audience engagement.

Professional skills for artists

- Communication skills
- Navigating feelings and needs
- Coaching tools, including group coaching and self-coaching techniques
- Action learning sets

THE PROGRAMME

Artist-library understanding

The sessions about artist-library understanding focused on getting to know the library buildings, their histories and communities to identify opportunities for what could happen in the spaces. Some of this was done through looking at examples of what other artists had done in other libraries, and some was done through physical tours and walk-arounds, sometimes including creative mapping, texturing and rubbing exercises to look at the space in different ways. The staff members who joined these tours also noticed new things about their spaces:

"It's the underused spaces that we've discovered, that we hadn't seen before, and now we want to activate them. And they can be small as a little cupboard underneath the staircase or a section at the entrance that we hadn't really discovered. This was not about just visitor flow and practicalities. This was more than that."

THE PROGRAMME

Project development

The project development time was integrated to give the artists time to start planning their placement projects so that they could hit the ground running and make the most of their three research days. Whereas some sessions in the training week felt a little destabilising through being offered lots of new information and skills, the planning sessions helped to find confidence again and pinpoint the available options and next steps. An artist explains:

"It's quite a shake-up in five days to go from being an artist who makes specific things to suddenly feeling a bit lost and going, oh no, how do I approach this?" Another continues: "I like the feeling of getting lost in the middle of it. I like my thinking being broken down, and then you start working on building it back up."

Image Credit: Sean Pollock

THE PROGRAMME

Professional skills

The professional skills sessions were highly rated by the artists, with most saying the sessions around coaching, self-coaching, goal setting and articulating their ideas were highly impactful to them and something they would take with them into any future work too. To some artists these were entirely new skills, to others it offered new applications of existing skills:

"There were skills that I had from my workplace area, such as, SMART objectives or goals and things like that. But it was amazing actually implementing it into an artistic practice side, where I think when it came up, I was at first like, oh, no, I already know this, I do this at work. And then we started figuring out how you applied it to art, and it was completely different."

Image Credit: Sean Pollock

UNDERSTANDING THE LIBRARY CONTEXT

One of the aims of the training week was to offer the artists a deeper understanding of how Hackney Libraries – as well as libraries in general – work, to allow them to come up with more tailored proposals for interventions that might help these libraries improve their offer. It did help inform the artists' plans indeed, and they particularly valued the sessions by artists **Ingrid Pollard** and **Olivia Plender**, which offered inspiration through lots of examples of work they had done in libraries elsewhere.

However, there might have been more sessions featuring Hackney Library staff, who were keen to share **expertise about their libraries and audiences** with the artists. This could have offered the artists a wider sense of the resources available at each library (such as specific collections, spaces, or communities), as well as a deeper understanding of the specific issues that each library encounters. This in turn, would help the artists to save time in their research, and would allow them to tailor their proposals to the questions that needed solving most urgently for each library.

Alternatively, the library staff could have sat in with more of the training sessions to engage in shared discussions, but in reality they could not take the time out to spend five full days in training. Instead, some of the managers attended a single session each, and most of the floor staff did not get the chance to join. Budget to cover extra shifts would have made this possible, and had they joined these sessions, the staff believes this would have resulted in even more tailored placement activities and a more efficient use of the placement days.

Image credit: Hackney Council, 2019

✦ TIP

While best practice examples from other libraries are an important source of inspiration, it is also necessary to feature examples and resources from the local library host to create a better understanding of the specifics of that environment.

THE PLACEMENTS

The locations

The placements took place in four of Hackney's eight public libraries. Artists were given time during the training week to get to know the libraries, and had toured two of the locations. Library staff also prepared a short profile on each library, to give information about the history, location, collection and facilities of each library. The aim of this was to offer **connection points** (or what the course facilitator called "nodes of enquiry") that the artists might be able to use as starting points for their research.

THE LOCATIONS

The artists chose the following four libraries to work in:

Dalston CLR James Library

Named after the writer and political activist, the CLR James library opened in 2012 at a large development site replacing an old theatre with a rich musical history. The library hosts the Hackney Archives, as well as a large music scores collection, the Library of Things, and an education space.

Homerton Library

Opened 50 years ago in 1974, this library is situated close to Homerton Hospital, fire station and the Hackney Marshes. All book stocks are ordered and managed here. The library has a large foyer with exhibition space, as well as a small performance theatre with piano and digital projector for screenings, and a piano practice room.

Image Credit: Jay Price

THE LOCATIONS

Shoreditch Library

Shoreditch Library on Hoxton Street was refurbished in 2019-2020 to include flexible working and making spaces and an upgraded children's library. It serves a diverse community including many estates on the edge of Shoreditch in an area which hosts galleries and arts venues, including Hoxton Hall.

Hackney Central Library

This library has been housed in a civic centre opposite the original library building – now a cinema – since 1999, alongside Hackney Museum, whose collections focus on the history of migration to Hackney. The library's collections include local history, as well as multi-language book stocks. Capital development is planned for the building, which will improve visibility and wayfinding. The local area is culturally vibrant and houses a large Vietnamese community. This is the busiest of Hackney's libraries.

Image Credit: Sean Pollock

✦ TIP

Creating short profiles or info sheets about the locations, communities or resources that artists might be working with helps them to find entry points quicker and make connections to the space more easily.

THE ACTIVITIES

The placements consisted of three days of paid time (at the sector-recommended £250 per day) for each artist to spend in their chosen library doing research and/or piloting activity to inform their project proposals. The expectations were open as to the focus and practice of enquiry. They generally took one of three different forms:

Artists taking an observation approach were keen to "just listen to the space and watch the space" to see what would emerge, and to "be as invisible as possible" or "become an occupant as well". Examples of the intervention or activities approaches were an installation where users could contribute their drawings on wood slices, a craft workshop for making appliqué cushions and working with textiles, a language café that used the Vietnamese archive at the library to tell stories of Vietnamese experiences, or discussion groups to share experiences of motherhood or chronic illness.

The exploration within each of these projects informed the artists' final proposals for creative interventions that might happen across Hackney Libraries.

Artists spending time **observing** existing activities or general library use

Artists running their own **engagement activities** with library visitors as participants

Artists leaving an **installation** or **intervention** in the space that users could interact with by themselves

ASKING VISITORS

What does the library mean to you?

Artist Jay Price describes the activity they designed for their placement:

"I designed an inclusive participatory activity to get creative feedback from Homerton Library users about their library and local area. The project was designed to engage with those who may not otherwise engage with organised activities, to get a breadth of information from a full spectrum of visitors. Through a welcoming environment of chairs with brightly coloured cushions, surrounded by plants, and tables laid with bright pots of paint, pens, and slices of wood, visitors coming through the main doors were invited to sit down and take a break by creating one or two images.

There were two questions to respond to: 'what image or symbols represent the library to you?' and 'what image of symbol represents Homerton to you?' Responses to the first question gave insight into what people used the library for, how they felt about it, and what their community was like. The question about the local area gave insights into the scope of experiences, backgrounds, activities and perceptions of their town." Both helped the library to understand how people interacted with it and informed my proposal at the end of the project.

Image Credit: Jay Price

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SHARING VIET MOMENTS AND MEMORIES

Artist Maria Than describes the activity they designed for their placement:

I ran a two-hour workshop for the Viet British community based around the AN Viet Archive, a Vietnamese archive. Participants could pick their favourite piece from the archive and write a short Viet and English caption as to why it was their favourite. This happened in Hackney Central Library. The workshop was framed as a casual social event for the community to practice both languages in a light-hearted setting where they also dive into their culture and history through the archival pieces.

Image Credit: Maria Than

THE ACTIVITIES

A strong **marketing and communications plan** was needed to make the activities as impactful as possible, as it ensured library users were aware of the events being organised and the unique opportunities that these pop-up activities provided. Hackney Council's marketing team had been aware of the project and had offered to promote the activities as a summer programme, but the tight timeline of the project left little lead-in time for a marketing campaign to be fully integrated.

This meant activities were promoted individually, rather than as a coherent programme, and generally only a few weeks in advance. As a result, most participants came through natural footfall in the library, which included fewer new audience groups. Projects where new audiences were reached were often those that made targeted invitations to specific audience communities, for example through a call out via the Hackney Chinese Community Centre to target the local Vietnamese and Asian communities.

Image Credit: Sean Pollock

✨ TIP

The timeline of the project does not only need to allow for all the work to happen, but also for communicating the work to stakeholders and audiences. Leaving enough time for promoting placement activities to library users will offer a better chance of building larger audiences and reaching new groups too. Additionally, going through specific community centres and networks to invite new groups in can help to reach those new audiences.

THE PROJECT PROPOSALS

Hypothetical proposals

At the end of their placements, the ten artists were invited to submit a proposal for an art project at Hackney Libraries, inspired by their research and interaction with the library and its users.

These were hypothetical proposals in the first instance, to allow for blue sky thinking without many constraints. Some artists felt that not having to worry about feasible budgets offered a rare opportunity to make their ideas much more ambitious. Others also valued having the research time, which is not often included in other commissions.

One artist explains:

"I think it's nice to enter a project where actually the focus isn't necessarily on having this outcome, the focus is on what we're doing. I think you can get so tied up in like, okay, they want this product out of me, and actually, it's really nice to be involved in what that product is even going to maybe look like, rather than the actual product. It also allowed more time to actually do it right, rather than let me rush this and try and do what they want."

THE PROJECT PROPOSALS

The way Art at Heart made paid time available for idea development and research offered a much more equitable approach than is often standard in the arts sector. The artists talk about the "invisible labour" that routinely goes into proposal documents without compensation for that time, and there are only few artists among the group who are in a position to choose their projects based on whether time spent prior to the handoff of the proposal is paid for. Art at Heart presents best practice by valuing this experimentation time through remuneration.

The aim of the proposals was to generate new thinking and offer an artist's perspective on how the upcoming capital projects at two of Hackney's libraries might approach incorporating arts elements. Library staff really welcomed the artists' "fresh eye" and the project organisers are now fundraising to take some of these proposals beyond the hypothetical and make them happen. In some cases, this will involve a scaling down of the ideas, which is done in collaboration with the relevant artists.

Image Credit: Sean Pollock

✦ TIP

Having confirmed commissioning opportunities at the end of the training programme is not vital, as inviting hypothetical proposals can also offer meaningful inspiration and fresh perspectives that can inform further programmes or capital developments in more indirect and ambitious ways.

FROM PILOT ACTIVITY TO PROPOSAL

Image Credit: Jay Price

Artist Jay Price

"During my residency, I had visitors paint on wooden slices the things that they feel the local library and the Homerton area represent for them. These drawings informed the content of the final proposal – the images and symbols people made would be turned into a custom hieroglyphic to create artworks that directly reflect the library, town and community. That local language was turned into designs for rubbing plaques, positioned outside the Homerton Library and within the entrance, to draw people into the spaces by the voices of their own neighbours, to discover the opportunities available to them. Visitors and passersby can take direct rubbings of the plaques to take away for free, placing the value on the artwork by what they choose to do with them, and becoming a further collaborator in the community artwork."

FROM PILOT ACTIVITY TO PROPOSAL

Artist Maria Than

"As part of my placement I ran a workshop for the local Vietnamese community to work with the AN Viet Archive, because I wanted to test out how the library might be able to run an alternative mother tongue school for this community group. The workshop helped me to determine how to really get the participants to engage with the material in both languages. Having an interpreter there turned out to be essential, especially one who was quite sociable and was able to make people comfortable in both languages in a more casual setting. Through talking with both the library staff and the community members, I was able to understand how to make future workshops better, along with getting some insightful comments directly from the guests, for instance about having Vietnamese music in the space for mood-setting or the duration of the workshop. It also helped me think about how the loose structure of the informal conversations could be documented properly for the installation idea I pitched to the Art at Heart team."

Image Credit: Maria Than

TIP

Libraries can be about community just as much as about books, so it is important to pitch the balance between these two angles throughout the training week to produce results that are tailored to the social or library spaces they respond to.

PROPOSALS SPECIFIC TO LIBRARIES

The proposals that were submitted covered a wide range of projects, from crafts workshop series to spatial design interventions to increase access to one of the library buildings, and from language café events to creating a zine collection for the library.

In fact, few of them focused on books or reading, as most proposals considered libraries as social spaces first and foremost. This focus therefore meant that the proposed projects became being less specific to libraries, but could have potentially been implemented in a wider range of public institutions, such as archives or community halls.

This observation might be pointing to a natural inclination for artists to be drawn to a story resource as rich as Hackney' s archives, housed in one of the libraries, but perhaps also highlights how the training week might have been differently set up. The sessions focused mostly on how to work in socially-engaged ways with library users, but could have included more time with library staff to go through the book-based resources that they already hold.

V: NEW WAYS OF WORKING:
THE IMPACT WE MADE

TRANSFORMING LIBRARIES

Changing the definition of what a library space is

"Art is not the first thing you think of when you think about libraries. Having artists, it's good to be associated with that, because it means a change. I am embracing the change in our nature, really. We've been adapting." (Library staff member)

The Art at Heart project has helped both library staff and artists to think about what libraries are and challenge existing preconceptions. The artists overwhelmingly describe how the placements broadened their understanding of the many cultural and social functions libraries hold. They talk about it as a place of refuge, creativity, (mental) wellbeing, and improving lives, as well as a hub for communities and bringing people together.

The library staff also talk about fresh perspectives on welcoming new audiences, on barriers and accessibility, and on using creativity to activate underused spaces. Moreover, they reflected how art could provide a pipeline into collections, reading, exploring identity, as well as community, and how art in libraries can convene different types of conversations.

Image Credit: Polly Jane Wilson

Art turned out to be a powerful instrument to reconsider what libraries can do, what needs they can meet and to offer new access points for audiences to (re)discover their local libraries. One of the organisers describes how the conversations during the training week formed a turning point for many of the stakeholders involved that changed their existing perceptions of library spaces and their potential:

"There was, not an epiphany, but almost like a real intense realisation, about the rationale of libraries, the purpose of libraries. I know that sounds a little bit obvious, but one artist started a conversation which was about a realisation about the importance of libraries in their own early life, and an awareness of how libraries change lives and how they determine, you know, offer up opportunities for people to find themselves or to feel represented or feel supported, or as safe havens, or all the incredible things that we know libraries do. [...] And that conversation was almost like it was like a really palpable felt sense across the room, you know."

✷ IMPACT

Art can provide a pipeline into collections, reading, exploring identity, community, and offer access to new audiences. Moreover, libraries' many community functions broaden the definition of what libraries could be.

HOW CAN ARTISTS HELP LIBRARIES SURVIVE?

"One of the artists said, I feel angry. They were talking about this realisation of what was at stake in the underinvestment of library provision, a recognition also of the ambitions of the librarians being huge, and how tragic it was that that wasn't being invested in."

(Course facilitator)

During the training week the artists became much more aware of the scarcity of funding for public libraries in the UK, and they considered what their role might be in addressing the challenges that this caused for libraries. This inspired some of the artists to think about how their work might propose solutions, for instance by bringing new audiences into libraries, highlighting the need for these institutions, and building more sustainable local connections.

Image Credit: Kat Hudson

HOW CAN ARTISTS HELP LIBRARIES SURVIVE?

Image Credit: Kat Hudson

Library staff was similarly keen to think about how artists might help inspire new business models that could **help to keep libraries open**. A staff member explains:

"We don't need help to be amazing, we need help to survive. How can artists help libraries survive? Can they help libraries survive? Is there anything they can do? The more we can income generate, as well as serve all our communities, the less likely we are to be axed. [...] But how can artists really help us solve some of those big problems that we can't solve on our own?"

HOW CAN ARTISTS HELP LIBRARIES SURVIVE?

It suggests that the transformation that is needed is one in the business models to generate more earned income, or to help bring more footfall in to build a stronger case for more funding. Library staff therefore suggest that where artists can help libraries best is not necessarily with more programming, but with offering creative ways of underlining the completely vital and urgent roles that libraries play in underserved areas, so that they can make a better case for their existence.

In the proposals that were submitted at the end of the placement library staff valued ideas that addressed the accessibility of the space, the approach to creating a welcoming and attractive offer for people who did not use the library yet, and that engaged new communities through breaking down language and cultural barriers.

Image Credit: Sean Pollock

✳ IMPACT

The biggest impact artists can make on libraries is not through designing additional programming for the sake of creating more activity, but through using their creativity to devise ways to underline the vital and urgent role of libraries in communities.

Image Credit: Sean Pollock

THE VALUE OF ARTIST PLACEMENTS FOR LIBRARIES

The artist as a problem solver

"What can librarians learn from artists about how to do things more effectively and vice versa? What can librarians teach artists about how to communicate with people, you know, about what other communication skills that they're using day to day that would get to the heart of what people need and want?" (Project organiser)

THE ARTIST AS A PROBLEM SOLVER

Image credit: Hackney Council, 2019

When artists and library staff work alongside each other a certain exchange happens, and this outcome of a placement project is often at least as important as the final artwork that is created, if not more.

Artists and library staff have different perspectives that they bring to working in public library spaces, and they can add great value to each other. A staff member describes how they approach the library as **"a space that we regularly see in a certain way and we use, maybe, like, in five different options, but the artist would show me that there is a sixth option."** They often bring new perspectives to a question that they have noticed in the space, whether that is an existing problem that the staff is aware of, or a new intervention that highlights where there is space for improvement.

One of the library staff highlights this role for artists as creative problem solvers:

"What's interesting, when you work with artists, is they can help solve your problems as a library service. You know, it's something quite motivational, because things come out of it that we didn't expect. For example, the Vietnamese artist working with the Vietnamese group, when she mentioned the language barrier, she really thought about how this would translate for library users that come to the library from different backgrounds, and her creative thinking transcends just her community or heritage."

THE ARTIST AS A PROBLEM SOLVER

Their own **lived experience** or cultural heritage might indeed be something that an artist can bring to a library to open a door to new communities. One of the library staff comments about the artists that: "They're also solving the problem of hearing about a library, because there will be people that maybe hadn't thought about books, but they really enjoy culture and creativity. So, the artists open up access to new audiences."

The artists equally noted how they might help libraries by contributing their **professional artistic skills**. Various interviewees suggest that artists can bring *"a certain materiality understanding"* that library staff running crafts workshops often wouldn't have, and that working with artists could offer an additional level of professionality and ambition to a library's arts offer.

In some placement contexts it might be suitable to give the artists specific problems or questions to consider and help the library find solutions for them. In the Art at Heart programme their inquiry was kept fully open-ended, as the aim was to introduce fresh perspectives, but a library staff member can see the potential for more targeted creative thinking work with artists in the future:

"I'd have loved to have set a brief asking artists to solve things for us. I think in the training week there was talk about different display areas and interesting exhibition spaces for example, and we're actually working on an exhibition policy and display policy at the moment. I would love it if someone came in and helped, took that on."

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✳ IMPACT

Artists can bring new perspectives, lived experience, or professional skills that might help libraries to address problems that they do not have the experience or skill to solve alone or where the artist's creative input might lead to new, innovative solutions.

THE ARTIST AS DISRUPTOR

"Artists can help with visualisation, just the ability to visualise out of the box, to think not only about functionality, but also about form. That's what creatives are mostly good at." (Artist)

Bringing in artists as disruptors and to offer "fresh eyes" and "challenge the way the space had been used" was an important aim of the Art at Heart project. The artist placements indeed brought **new ways of thinking** about the spaces, the quality of the activities that could be done, and about how new audiences might discover the libraries.

Artist might be able to offer new perspectives where library staff might be held back more easily by practicalities or precedents set by existing routines. One artist – who also has experience of working as a librarian – explains the difference between thinking about interventions as an artist and as a library staff member:

"As an artist, you're thinking, how would I want to approach the space? It comes from a more personal perspective, and it's less encumbered by the practicalities that have to be followed when you're in a library job and the timeframes that you have to meet and the expectations to make disturbances in the space and test out to see if they're going to work. And you don't get to necessarily have that playful element if you're employed and you're having to make all the considerations from a professional's perspective."

Image Credit: Kat Hudson

THE ARTIST AS DISRUPTOR

Image Credit: Kat Hudson

The library managers across Hackney's sites agree that artists can add value with new ways of thinking: "I think having artists come in, I think it's good for staff to learn how to approach things in a new way. It's kind of refreshing, having new skills in the library and new viewpoints."

However, having artists in to **disrupt** existing thinking can also risk challenging the core values of the library. One artist explains being very aware of how (artistic) disruption might not marry well with the safety that a library space often offers visitors: "We talk about disruptions in public art, and disruptions are important and powerful, and how do we break someone's day to day and all of those things, but I didn't want to disrupt a space that was a sanctuary to so many people."

THE ARTIST AS DISRUPTOR

Another artist chose to be more disruptive by putting hazard tape all around the library space as part of their installation, and library staff were worried it contradicted the message they had spent a lot of time and effort to build of libraries as welcoming and safe spaces. It highlighted a need to balance the process of disruption with the needs and boundaries of the library context. One artist underlined the value that Art School Plus brought in creating this balance, through encouraging artists to take a more holistic approach:

"People like Art School Plus are trained to not disrupt without regard for its reception. They are trained to really approach it as a project, you know, with stakeholders, not only the staff, but also the people that come to the library. Knowing that there are artists out there like Art School Plus, people that are trained to do this, should give libraries more confidence in how an artist can, I guess, behave in a library space. It offers a bit more trust."

✳ IMPACT

Artists can be particularly skilled at disrupting existing thinking in favour of innovation, but these new ideas might also clash with existing library practices or values. The scaffolding of a training week can help artists to build understanding, nuance and trust to ensure their suggestions are impactful.
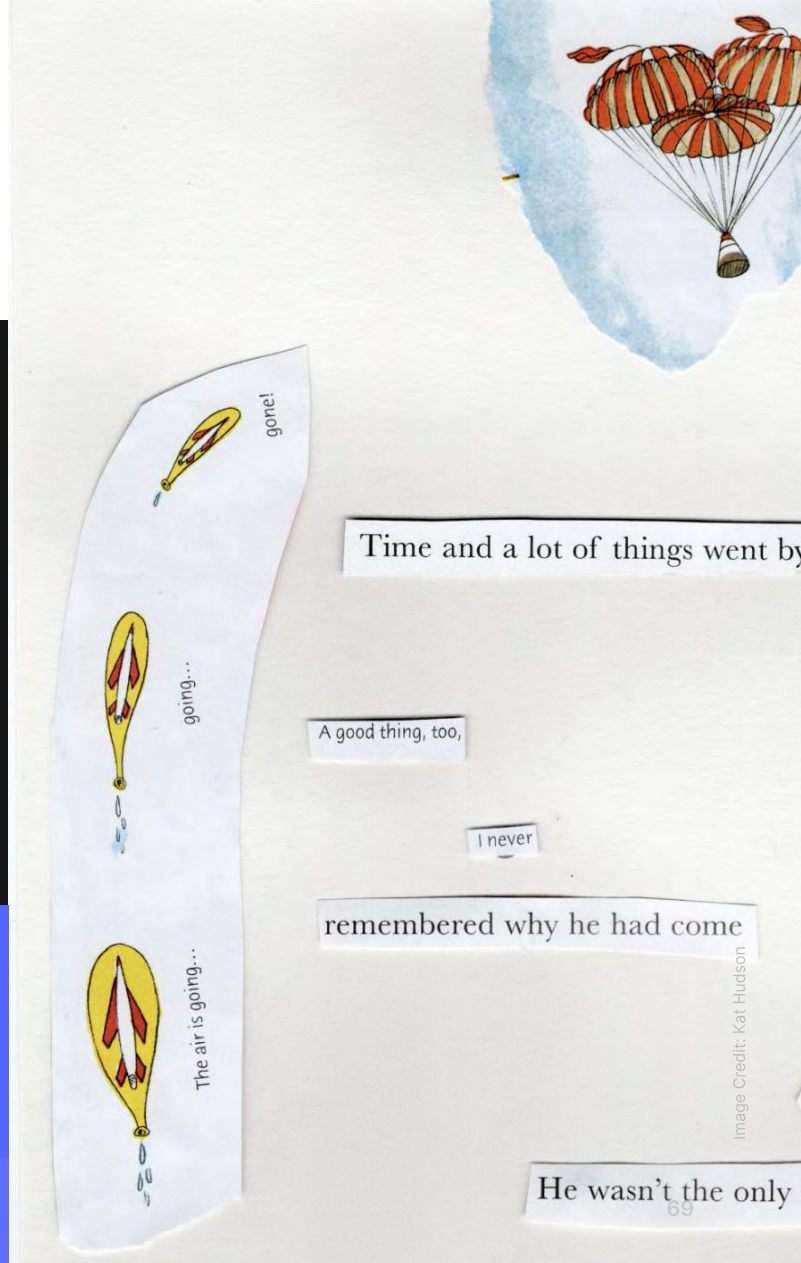
Time and a lot of things went by

A good thing, too,

I never

remembered why he had come

He wasn't the only

going...

gone!

The air is going...

Image Credit: Kat Hudson

Image Credit: Sean Pollock

PLACEMENTS INCREASING RESOURCE AND CAPACITY

This artist highlights how the Art School Plus training ensured that artistic disruption was preceded by building understanding, nuance and a development of trust with library staff and communities, which helps the fresh perspectives offered to be tailored and relevant, and means their reception among staff and communities is generally positive.

Having ten artists do three-day placements in the library spaces meant Hackney Libraries gained thirty days' worth of artistic work through the Art at Heart project. This is a considerable time resource in itself, and the artists were very aware of the value of this in a generally overstretched and overburdened library sector. One artist says:

"I came in and I was like [to the staff], you're all tired, you're all dead, but hey, I'm coming here like a spring chicken [...] I'm here for three days, you've got me anyway, and being paid, and I can do this for you. Whereas they don't have any of that resource. That's a huge difference we're making."

Going beyond practical considerations such as time, the artists were also aware they could help advocate for libraries in more general ways. One explains:

"I remember we asked all the staff what would be the one thing you would change in your library? And everyone had the same answer: we need money and we need a new roof, and we need a new level of everything. And we might not be able to fix that directly, but what we can do, however, is create something that then inspires whoever is allocating funding or resources to see the space as more alive, we can help promote the space. We can help you make it more lively by trying to bring more people, because we have more time on our hands. Let us work with you, allow us to try and help you as much as we can through creative means to inspire more people to use a space. And the more people use a space, the more important it becomes on the map, the more important it is in the eyes of whoever allocates the resources. So, we can do that, we can indirectly get you a new roof by literally drumming up more excitement about your space."

However, the additional resource that these placements offered should also be seen in perspective to the scale of deprivation of library budgets. Many of the staff comment on how the budget for just the Art at Heart project is in fact 1.5 times the size of the annual public engagement programming budget for all eight of Hackney's libraries together. It underlines the importance of the extra resource that the project grants, as well as the unique scale of this investment and the responsibility to share learning from the project to the wider sector.

Image Credit: Sean Pollock

PLACEMENTS INCREASING RESOURCE AND CAPACITY

The artist placements also offered a chance for artists and library staff to amplify each other's work and exchange skills. An artist highlighted they were very aware of the expertise library staff could bring to running workshops in the library space. They wondered:

"How can I actually consult with them and feel like we're on an equal plane, rather than me being kind of parachuted in by the 'higher ups' as someone doing something exciting, when actually they're already doing so many of these exciting things. I just want to tap into it and bring something new out of it."

Also at a practical level, artists and library staff offered **complementary skills** that reinforced their work together. For example, the staff noticed how artists sometimes used artistic language that library audiences would not always be familiar with, and realised there was a lot of value in them translating between the artists and the audiences they knew so well. One staff member describes their relationship as "allies" in getting library visitors excited about arts and libraries. An area where there might have been more scope still for skill exchange would be if library staff had taken part in the training week as well, so that there could have been more time for sharing practices and so that there may have been a more long-term investment in professionally developing the library staff.

Image Credit: Kat Hudson

✳ IMPACT

Having artists in residence offers libraries extra capacity to produce work or run programming, as well as another stakeholder to help advocate for the need for libraries. Skills exchange between artists and library staff or training programmes such as Art School Plus might also help build professional capacity among both artists and librarians.

NEW WAYS OF COMMUNITY-FOCUSED WORKING

Experimenting with socially-engaged approaches

One of the aims of the Art at Heart project and training week was to introduce new ways of socially-engaged working:

"I think usually I try to do what I always have done and what I'm comfortable with, but this residency has pushed me to make more collaborative work and think about how to incorporate other people's work into my own. It has improved my skills on how to involve the wider community into my project. [...] It has built my confidence to reach out to people, and it's also made me think about how I can make work that's more practical for the community." (Artist)

NEW WAYS OF COMMUNITY-FOCUSED WORKING

Some of the library staff, similarly, had originally expected the artists to "make a piece of art for the space" or something else "more material", when in fact, they noticed that most of the placements focused on interacting with the public instead. Soon the library staff reflected that "having them interact with the local communities where they were based is probably pretty useful, and potentially more useful than them coming and designing something and hanging it on the wall and people not really paying that much attention to it." In fact, the opportunities for interactive engagement the artists created meant that library visitors might even have the chance to make a "small piece of art" themselves, which many library users valued. The training week helped the artists find a balance between bringing in community voices while also "staying true to their own practice".

A note should be added about how community engagement projects are generally very **resource intensive**. One library professional reflects on this issue: "I think that that any work that is properly attending to communities requires double, if not more, of whatever we think is needed." They are aware that a three-day placement might not be long enough to allow enough time for artists to really build up genuine relationships with local communities, and that this work usually lends itself well for small groups, but can be difficult to remain impactful when scaled up.

Image credit: Hackney Council, 2019

✳ IMPACT

The Art at Heart projects offered new ways for the artists to think about socially-engaged working and incorporating community engagement practices. While this is a resource-intensive approach that usually attracts small audiences, the engagement might be deeper and more worthwhile.

REACHING NEW AUDIENCES

Another impact of an increased focus on working with communities is that some of the residency projects managed to attract new audiences, who would usually not visit the library otherwise. For some artists, that was a result of their workshop content or targeted Instagram advertisement approach. For others, that was because they offered a specific bridge through breaking down **cultural or language barriers**, for instance through the African, Vietnamese, Ukrainian and Russian heritage of some of the artists. It meant the artists opened up access to new audiences by the culture, heritage or language that they brought, which were often not represented among the library staff.

A particular example was the project run by a Vietnamese artist that targeted the local Vietnamese community. A library staff member noticed how this project set up a collaboration between the Vietnamese archive and the library and "was able to engage people who wouldn't have engaged." Moreover, they point out it "is something we could continue if we can find a way to continue it as a collaboration between [Hackney] Libraries and Archives. Another colleague agrees about its long-term potential:

"About the Vietnamese workshop, if the artists connected to specific harder to reach communities can come in and be that bridge, that's very valuable to the community and social cohesion. It's really valuable to the library to know that we're serving people better, because that's what we're always trying to do. I think those are the sort of areas that are worth exploring and that could be developed further."

Image Credit: Sean Pollock

Image Credit: Polly Jane Wilson

REACHING NEW AUDIENCES

In some cases, it is not necessarily the cultural bridge that the artist creates, but their **different status** in the library space that can open up new interactions. Artists can be more "neutral" actors in library spaces, who are not part of the "transactional" relationship between librarians and library users, but are in a position to "soften that interaction" instead. One of the artists gives an example about a visitor they met:

"He was a widower, a pensioner, and he was from Latvia, but Russian. He said, I come here every day to socialise, and every time I was in, he was there. And I spoke to him for about an hour, and the staff said to me, he's never spoken to one of us. I found that really interesting, because I think he knew that I wasn't part of the library team, I wasn't authoritative in that kind of way."

Other projects also proposed strategies for bringing about new interactions, but through **spatial design**, rather than community engagement work. These projects proposed interventions that might improve general access, including by reconsidering the outside of the library buildings, which staff agreed could make a real change in footfall to a level that would make it easier for libraries to make a stronger case for their existence.

✳ IMPACT

The artists managed to draw new audiences, for instance by breaking down cultural and language barriers, as well as inviting new interactions, for instance by offering themselves as an alternative access point to library staff, or by inviting different engagement through spatial design. The diversity of artists in this cohort also helped to bring a much more diverse range of communities through the doors.

CREATING BUY-IN ACROSS THE ORGANISATION

The importance of invested leadership

An experimental project like Art at Heart requires a certain **openness** from the library team to *"give yourself space and time to sit back and look at things differently"*, as one of the organisers describes. This comes with a level of risk that the leadership initiating or signing off on the project need to be willing to take. One of the project partners has noticed this key ingredient too: *"I think that this project might be different in a context where the team and the leadership weren't so switched on and open. I don't think that is typical."*

Moreover, stakeholders noticed a very **collaborative approach to leadership** among the project partners. One of the key stakeholders, who would describe themselves as *"a very collaborative leader, rather than a hierarchical one"*, saw in fellow partners a *"reconfirmation that there is real value when you listen to people and you give them space and a voice."* They argue that *"this project has shown me how productive you get when you actually nurture people and you collaborate."*

As a result, they have put a project team together in which there is space for each partner to bring their wider experience and high-quality expertise, so that the entire project can build on their strengths. The success of this leadership approach, according to a project team member, is about *"respecting the different elements that each different partner can bring, and making sure that there's a balance between all of them without any real gaps."*

Image Credit: Kat Hudson

✳ IMPACT

To maximise the impact of a project, strong buy-in from the library leadership is necessary. This includes a level of openness among the leadership and an intention to work collaboratively and to build on the strengths of all stakeholders.

COMMUNICATION ACROSS ALL LEVELS

To be successful, a collaborative leadership approach needs to be followed up with clear communication of this collaborative vision to the rest of the library team and stakeholders:

"How do you translate everything very quickly to everyone else below the leadership level who is not necessarily so close to the project and hasn't come with the same understanding, expertise and experience, or even from the same sector?"

To address this challenge, the project team carefully planned how to **communicate** the project across library staff at all levels and to make sure that the project benefitted the staff as much as it would the artists. They were aware that among the library workforce there were many staff members with an arts background, cultural sector experience or or their own creative ideas, and so they thought about how to include these staff members in the collaborations with the artists. The artists noticed this available potential too and were keen to "find out their input and how they think it would work better".

COMMUNICATION ACROSS ALL LEVELS

Strong communication includes building in enough lead-in time for the communication to happen, both for internal messages to filter down large organisational hierarchies, as well as for project messages to reach their intended external audiences and communities. Moreover, the effectiveness of the communication increases when it becomes a two-way conversation, so there is space to ask questions, build trust, and iron out misunderstandings. One of the artists suggests:

"It would have been good to have a day with the library staff and the artists together, having conversations to each other, so that the librarians feel that they are being listened to and we as artists can think about the practicalities of their workplace and of how people use the space, so that we're responding more appropriately to their needs."

Image credit: Hackney Council, 2019
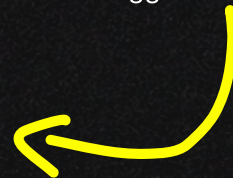
✳ IMPACT

A crucial ingredient for creating buy-in across the organisation more widely is clear and meaningful communication across all staff levels. This requires long enough lead-in times as well as an opportunity for two-way conversations, so all stakeholders can feel invested and empowered.

VI: SUMMARY:
OUR LEARNING AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Image Credit: Sean Pollock

TIPS FOR SETTING UP ARTIST PLACEMENTS IN LIBRARIES

Already at the **bid writing** stage, the voices of all stakeholders need to be represented in the project design, to ensure it meets everyone's expectations, achieves all relevant aims, builds in all stakeholders' values, and creates benefits for all of those involved.

The **selection criteria** for artists or curators will influence the perspectives that are represented, so make sure they suit your values and aims for the project.

A strong **project team** includes a wide range of people from all stakeholder organisations and departments. This creates buy-in across the organisations involved, but also makes the most of the expertise everyone brings.

Make sure your **artist or curator brief** conveys clarity, practicality and inspiration, and also considers access and inclusion to give all applicants an equal chance.

Taking time to **set expectations** together between all collaborators seems vital to build trust, set clear aims, and share existing learning, which all lead to better outcomes. Sharing these expectations between staff, artists, curators and the wider project team helps to make sure everyone is on the same page from the start.

The **size of the artist cohort** determines the depth of engagement that the budget allows for. It is important to strike a balance based on the project values and needs of all partners.

A training week should offer a **combination of learning themes**, including a contextual understanding of the sector the artists work within alongside more practical professional skills. It is also important to embed time for discussions that can help artists to plan and work out their ideas during the week, allowing them to apply their new skills.

TIPS FOR SETTING UP ARTIST PLACEMENTS IN LIBRARIES

While best practice examples from other libraries are an important source of inspiration, it is also necessary to feature **examples and resources** from the local library host to create a better understanding of the specifics of that environment.

Creating short **profiles or info sheets** about the locations, communities or resources that artists might be working with helps them to find entry points quicker and make connections to the space more easily.

It is important to facilitate a strong **conversation between the artists and library staff** to allow artists to build on the staff's deep understanding of local audience needs, as well as of what has been done before at the library. This can offer quicker progression to projects that address gaps in the library's practice and a more efficient use of the three research days.

The timeline of the project does not only need to allow for all the work to happen, but also for **communicating** the work to stakeholders and audiences. Leaving enough time for promoting placement activities to library users will offer a better chance of building larger audiences and reaching new groups too. Additionally, going through specific community centres to invite new groups in can help to reach those new audiences.

Having confirmed commissioning opportunities at the end of the training programme is not vital, as inviting **hypothetical proposals** can also offer meaningful inspiration and fresh perspectives that can inform further programmes or capital developments in more indirect ways.

Libraries can be about **community** just as much as about books, so it is important to pitch the balance between these two angles throughout the training week to produce results that are tailored to the social or library spaces they respond to.

THE VALUE AND IMPACT OF ARTISTS WORKING IN LIBRARIES

✦ Art can provide a **pipeline** into collections, reading, exploring identity, community, and offer access to new audiences. Moreover, libraries' many community functions broaden the definition of what libraries could be.

✦ The biggest impact artists can make on libraries is not through designing additional programming for the sake of creating more activity, but through using their creativity to devise ways to underline the **vital and urgent role** of libraries in communities.

✦ To maximise the impact of a project, strong buy-in from the library leadership is necessary. This includes a level of **openness** among the leadership and an intention to work **collaboratively** and to build on the strengths of all stakeholders.

✦ Artists can be particularly skilled at disrupting existing thinking in favour of **innovation**, but these new ideas might also clash with existing library practices or values. The scaffolding of a training week can help artists to build understanding, nuance and trust to ensure their suggestions are constructive.

✦ Having artists in residence offers libraries extra **capacity** to produce work or run programming, as well as another stakeholder to help **advocate** for the need for libraries. **Skills exchange** between artists and library staff or training programmes such as Art School Plus might also help build professional capacity among both artists and librarians.

✦ A crucial ingredient for creating buy-in across the organisation more widely is clear and meaningful **communication** across all staff levels. This requires long enough lead-in times as well as an opportunity for two-way conversations, so all stakeholders can feel invested and empowered.

✦ Artists can bring **new perspectives, lived experience,** or **professional skills** that might help libraries to address problems that they do not have the experience or skill to solve alone or where the artist's creative input might lead to new, innovative solutions.

✦ The Art at Heart projects offered new ways for the artists to think about **socially-engaged working** and incorporating **community engagement** practices. While this is a resource-intensive approach that usually attracts small audiences, the engagement might be deeper and more worthwhile.

✦ The artists managed to draw **new audiences**, for instance by breaking down cultural and language barriers, as well as inviting **new interactions**, for instance by offering themselves as an alternative access point to library staff, or by inviting different engagement through spatial design. The diversity of artists in this cohort also helped to bring a much more **diverse range of communities** through the doors.

RESOURCES

A toolkit for bringing (performance) art into libraries

A toolkit about design thinking for libraries

A toolkit on best practice for library exhibitions

Advice on how to put together an artist brief

Artist call out template

Artist contract template

Basic access checklist for events

Partnerships checklist

Checklist for hosting an event

Checklist for safeguarding audiences and artists