

**People United**  
Creating a kinder world

# Taking Care

## The Art of Kindness



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“ We inhabit a challenging social, political and environmental landscape. Every day we witness and experience increasing polarisation and social fragmentation. The world, our country and the communities we live in can often feel divided and disconnected. We need to think about kindness more than ever, not just as something soft and warm, but as something radical, strong and brave. ”

# Introduction

**Janice McGuinness, CEO, People United**

*Taking Care* is the third report in People United's trilogy of arts and kindness publications. It aims to show our participatory arts methodology and capture our working processes from a range of perspectives.

To accompany *Taking Care*, we've produced a companion resource, *Navigating with Kindness*, an artist-designed, metaphorical map that reflects the varied terrains a participatory project might take us through. Together with its accompanying prompt cards, we hope this resource can be useful to arts and community practitioners when weaving kindness into their own project planning.

We inhabit a challenging social, political and environmental landscape. Every day we witness and experience increasing polarisation and social fragmentation. The world, our country and the communities we live in can often feel divided and disconnected. We need to think about kindness more than ever, not just as something soft and warm, but as something radical, strong and brave.

At People United, we focus on how we can live well in the world together, tapping into people's potential for kindness. This doesn't mean we avoid challenging or complex subjects and situations, quite the opposite: our creative projects embrace the light, shade and complexities of what it means to be human - but whatever the circumstances, starting with positivity and openness is an integral part of our ethos, values and way of working.

We're a small organisation in the context of the sector's rich tapestry, but we aim to be a catalyst, activating ripples of kindness and positive action far and wide. One of the ways we do this is by contributing to wider research and provoking conversations about how the arts can help to create a more kind and caring society.

*Taking Care* is an exploration and sharing of the manner in which we work – day-to-day and year-to-year. In it, we have gathered together a kaleidoscope of different voices to talk about their experiences and share their learnings, from short thought pieces to academic essays. The range of contributors reflects the broad People United family of artists, associates, participants and current team members, who together create a journey of observation and reflection, taking us into the heart of our implicit and explicit working processes.

Many of you who read Taking Care will share People United's passionate belief in the positive role the arts, creativity and kindness can play, both at an individual and societal level – helping grow a sense of community, influencing behaviour and effecting social change. The reflections, analysis and experiences in this report reaffirm and celebrate this belief. For those who are less convinced about the relationship between the arts and kindness, I hope the stories shared in the following pages may answer some of your questions.

I am a relative newcomer to the People United family. As we worked together on Taking Care and its shape unfolded and developed through conversations, discussions and debate, I found myself not only gaining a deeper understanding of our practice and processes, but also of the values that sit at the heart of the organisation and thread through everything we do. I saw that kindness operated on so many levels: it can be both gentle and fierce, it can hold back or be a call to action. Kindness is thoughtful, active and radical. It makes a difference to the world. This is message shines through every voice in this report.

I want to thank the editorial team and all those who contributed, in so many ways, for their work, their welcome, their patience and their challenge as we went on the journey together. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as we enjoyed being part of the making of it, that you find it helpful and that it may, in some way, influence your own thinking or practice. I hope too that you enjoy Navigating with Kindness. We'd love to know how you use it and whether you've adapted and customised it. Sometimes it's just reassuring to know that others wrestle with the same kind of situations when trying to navigate, steer and care for creative projects and all those participating in them: hearing about your experience will in turn help and influence us as we go forward, and those ripples of kindness will get stronger and stronger.

# Setting the Scene

*People United: Why we do what we do*

Tina Corri, People United Associate and former People United CEO

## About Arts and Kindness

Arts and kindness are a compelling and powerful combination. At People United, as outlined in our first research paper, *Arts & Kindness*<sup>1</sup> (2012), we believe that kindness is the bond that underpins our common humanity. We are particularly interested in an interpretation of kindness from the field of social psychology called '**pro-social behaviour**', which is characterised by feelings of empathy, concern for others and a willingness to help and behave in ways that will benefit other people. In other words, we see kindness not just as a thought or a feeling, but also as a positive action. When this behaviour is embraced, practised and shared, as evidenced in our second research paper, *Changing the World through Arts and Kindness*<sup>2</sup> (2017), it can lead to positive change in individuals and communities: encouraging and supporting this is central to our work.

More recently, People United have increasingly used the term '**radical kindness**'. By this we mean that when kindness is applied to the structures and systems that define our society, it is possible to create kinder and more compassionate places to live, learn and work. People United's concept of kindness, therefore, is one that is strong, profound, brave and often challenging. Our projects set out to grow kindness in our schools, nurture connection within our communities and enhance compassion in our organisations – supporting individuals and groups to shape real social action. It is radical, active and transformative, and can lead to lasting change

## Why the arts?

We use the arts because this can help us to step inside someone else's shoes and look at things from a different perspective. As Maria Amidu says in her reflection on radical kindness later in this report, artists tend to look at things obliquely. Arts experiences – whatever the form or medium – can be astonishing vehicles to help us to reflect on and make sense of the world around us. As well as the ability to entertain and delight, they have an extraordinary capacity to surprise, comfort, invite questions or challenge us to think about something differently.

The arts can provide a conduit for conversation, offer a safe space to share ideas and experiences, or trigger a shift in opinion. Whether we interact as an audience member, participant, or co-creator, the arts can offer new ways into ideas and issues that hold relevance for us all; and in the hands of highly skilled practitioners, with the right conditions in place, these experiences can open our hearts and minds to more compassionate ways of seeing, being and acting.

But does it work? It's a fair question. I've found it is not uncommon for people who encounter People United's work for the first time to be sceptical of its impact or to identify kindness as something that is tenuous and without potency. I know I certainly did when I first came across this unusual and wonderful organisation. As an art historian and former art teacher, who has spent most of my working life in museums and galleries, I understood that the arts could be transformative, thrilling, give a sense of self, and open up new worlds – but could they really be used to encourage and grow kindness?

Our research shows that arts experiences can and do lead to kindness. Since People United's inception in 2006, we have built up over a decade of academic evidence, and time and time again our research shows the arts can increase empathy and compassion, develop greater connections between people, reduce prejudice and strengthen people's belief that they can make positive change happen.

## About our research

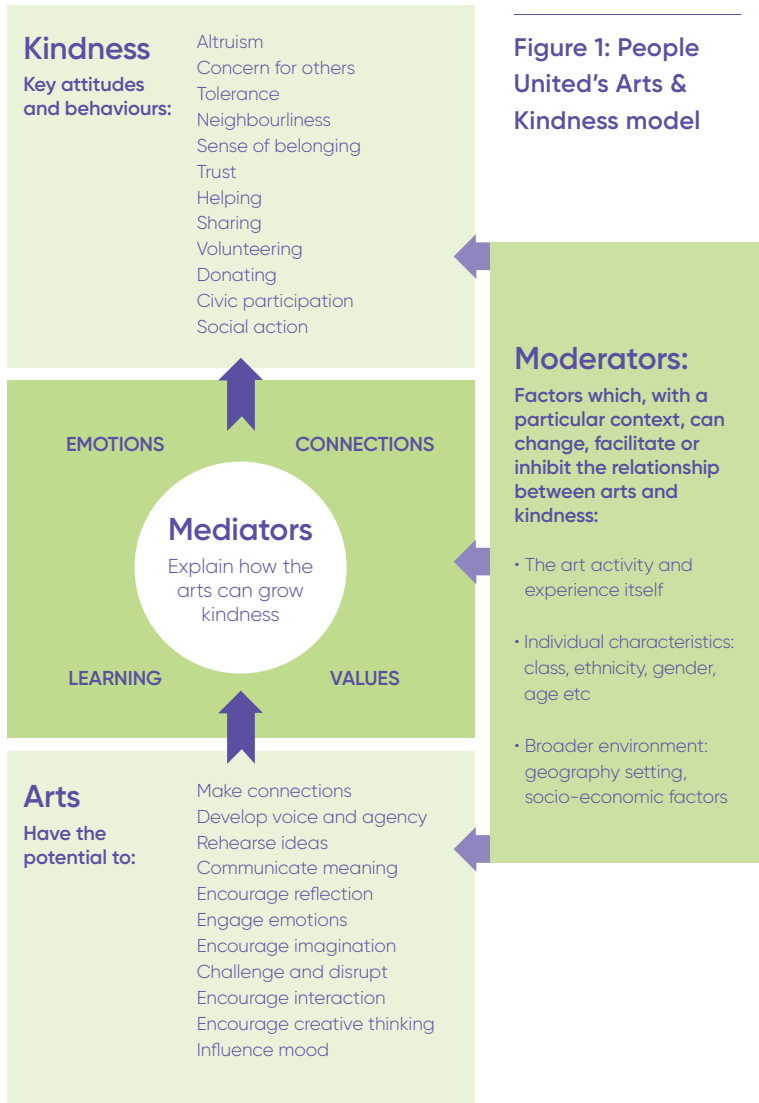
Examining the theory and practice of our work underpins People United's approach, made possible by our longstanding relationship with the School of Psychology at the University of Kent. Aligned to this is a range of rich collaborations with inspiring qualitative researchers who have helped us to understand the characteristics and consequences of our work over the years, and have worked with us to figure out if, when and why we are making a difference.

Looking back, our reports have emerged organically, acting as barometers of the charity's evolution. The essence of the three reports is summarised below, giving context for this third report and providing an overall framework for our thinking, findings and methodology.

## Arts & Kindness – the theory

Our first paper, *Arts & Kindness*, published in 2012, was a literature review that brought together a range of theories around the theme. It explored the concept of kindness across many fields, including psychology, philosophy, sociology and religion, economics, anthropology and neuroscience. This research further endorsed and developed our thinking and provided an academic rationale to underpin our work. Most importantly, it gave us an opportunity to fully develop and share our **Arts and Kindness model**.





**Figure 1: People United's Arts & Kindness model**

This model shows how the arts might inspire kindness through four mediators – emotions, connections, learning and values. It sits at the core of all our work and we always try to activate one or more of them.

People United's proposition, clearly expressed in the model, was that the arts could act as a superconductor for kindness. The next stage of our work – which is ongoing was to test that theory.

## *Changing the World through Arts and Kindness – the evidence*

Coinciding with People United's tenth anniversary, our second report was published in 2017. It brought together key research findings from a decade of projects and provided practical illustrations of our theory in action.

This report presented a series of case studies combining quantitative and qualitative research, alongside analysis of the qualities in our methodology that helped to engender change. The core findings it presented were that:

- arts interventions can increase empathy, connections and self-efficacy;
- the arts have unique properties that together can enable change and encourage social action;
- these effects can happen across art forms and they can have long-term outcomes;
- the complexity of research itself and the multiple contexts for any project mean that while we can evidence impact, we can only ever tell one part of the story.

*Changing the World through Arts and Kindness* provided the evidence that engagement with high quality, bespoke arts projects can foster kind intentions and create conditions that encourage empathy. It also identified a core challenge – how can we inspire kindness and positive social action on a larger scale?

## *Taking Care – the methodology*

Taking Care is the third report in People United's trilogy of Arts and Kindness publications. It sets out to articulate and share our distinct participatory arts methodology and has two complementary elements. The report, Taking Care, captures our working processes from a range of perspectives, including current arts research, and provides both an overview and summary of our methodology. Its companion resource, Navigating with Kindness, is an interactive, metaphorical map with accompanying cards, designed to be used by arts and community practitioners when weaving kindness into their own project planning and journeys.

Taking Care explores our methodology through essays, think pieces and first-hand accounts. It shows our experiences and tells our stories. The resource, Navigating with Kindness, has been created to share, support and help grow our community of practice. It recognises that living your values can be challenging, as kindness is not always the easy option.

Together they are a response to the ongoing interest in our methodology from fellow arts and community practitioners and others who have an affinity with our vision and values. As we expand and train a growing team of associates, mentees and volunteers, and continue to collaborate with a wider range of partners, there is a real need for our methodology to be transparent and easy to access. The creation of this report and the associated resource has been driven by our own desire to scrutinise, reflect upon and distil our practice, which until now we have never explicitly pinned down in words.



“ I see kindness as a value that requires courage and honesty. It is something robust and complex and challenging rather than something squashy and easy and soft around the edges. ”

# Radical kindness

*A moment of your time*

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**Maria Amidu, artist and People United Trustee**

## **Why I am a People United trustee and why I put radical in front of kindness**

My first close encounter with People United happened in 2013 when I was appointed as artist-in-residence for their Values commission in association with Turner Contemporary. I developed a project entitled: a moment of your time.

Then in 2016 I became a trustee. I am delighted to be on the Board because I have learnt and liked so much about the way the organisation's teams have functioned: their conviction to do kindness without apology; their tenacity to address meaningful and difficult social themes; their honesty in creating opportunities for artists to test ideas in less straightforward situations; and their foresight in building a genuine extended professional family of associates with staff, artists and specialists they have worked with previously.

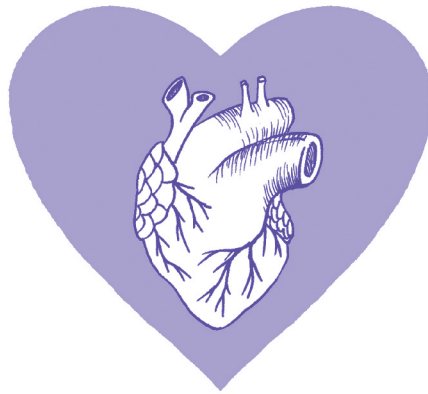
It was through People United that I first heard the term 'pro-social' – and now it guides me as I navigate my way through my artistic aspirations, which are very much aligned with People United's.

My creative concerns are influenced by the scope and significance of our common experiences. My projects are about exploring social relationships between people, usually mediated by objects and places. I make works to try to substantiate myriad lived experiences. I also pay attention to the debates around social practice and the role that visual art can play in activating change. I ask myself critical questions about the artistic outcomes in projects I develop and think about how they can be useful.

Artists often adopt an oblique position; we tend to be drawn to what is hidden, obscured, and unspoken. Through praxis, we try to define the complexities of being human. This makes artists ideal partners for People United to explore the issues that unite and divide us. People United's artistic programme acts as a provocateur, encouraging, creating and catalysing experiences which demand we all pay more attention and take more care of each other.

It is for this reason I put radical in front of kindness – because I see kindness as a value that requires courage and honesty. It is something robust and complex and challenging rather than something squashy and easy and soft around the edges. In my humble opinion, we humans need to find more effective and sustainable

ways to be good to each other, to embody a radical kindness. Aren't we all a bit drained by the indifferent-dislike-rude-hate-extreme rhetoric that looms up in our faces every few decades? Our current social and political climate makes this necessary transformation even more pressing. Surely we have it in us to evolve into a better version of our emotional and social selves? What better way to explore this possibility than through the pioneering work of an organisation whose mission and vision it is to investigate the full potential of people being united.



# We are not alone

*Supporting others to build a community of practice*

## Tom Andrews, People United Associate and founder CEO

People United develops exciting projects, commissions and initiatives, but going on quietly in the background (and often as an intrinsic part of these other initiatives) is our work to support others: through individual mentoring, specialist advice and designing away days. This short paper explores what is at the heart of this work.

*"A human being is a part of the whole, called by us 'universe', a part limited in time and space. We experience ourselves, our thoughts and feelings, as something separate from the rest. A kind of optical delusion of consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty."<sup>3</sup>*

Albert Einstein

At one of our first annual away days, staff and trustees drew a picture. 'What does People United look like?' There was no other briefing, it was just an instinctive exercise. We drew our pictures in private.

When these were shared, there was a surprisingly consistent theme that emerged: an image of a **web** or a **network** (admittedly the drawings did also include a range of weird stick people and the occasional heart). Our instinct was that we were part of something bigger, that we were interconnected with others. There was a recognition that we hadn't drawn a pyramid or ladder, but a wider system that we were part of, a system that was porous, complicated, flexible and dynamic.

To create change and impact within this societal web requires a distinctive offering (in our case 'arts and kindness' in theory and practice), good connections and generosity. We ask ourselves: as a small organisation how can we have the biggest impact in the world? Our answer is that we aim to be a multiplier; we can't do it all, but we can support, inspire, share with others and learn from others – and this echoes the reality of kindness. If I am kind to you, I feel good, you feel good, and we are both more likely to be kind to others. This knock-on effect is at the heart of why kindness can be contagious and powerful.

So, as well as initiating our own projects, there has always been a consistent and deliberate part of People United's work that has been about supporting other people. This has been through both formal programmes and offerings, such as our Arts and Kindness Mentoring Programme, and through how we work with artists, participants and partners. By sharing our successes and failures, our dreams, methods, resources and theories, we can reach and influence far more people, building a community of practice. It works both ways; as we support others, we learn from them too.

Reflecting on the support we have given over the years and the feedback received, there seem to be three central aspects of our work we have shared:

### Sharing a vision

Arts and kindness. 'That's a bit flaky isn't it?' It is easy to be defensive about our aims. In the early days, I sometimes avoided using the word kindness, for fear of being labelled an idealist with my head in the clouds. I quite like the word idealism now. One definition particularly appeals to me: that of doing something that may seem impossible to others. For me, this mingles optimism and boldness, to say clearly: 'Yes, I do believe in compassion, empathy, and kindness.'

When speaking to others, we stand up for what we believe in, our values and our motivation. This is important because change happens not just because of dissatisfaction with the current status quo but with a vision of a better alternative, a destination, hope.

An example of this was when a delegation from Dorset visited the office. After half a day of discussion and description of our methodologies, research and practical projects, we asked what is the most important thing about People United? They answered 'That you exist. That you are here. Knowing that a creative organisation stands for kindness gives us permission to also explore kindness and what we believe in.'

### Sharing a methodology

Idealism and vision are great, but if they are not backed up by a thoughtful process, rigour and professionalism, then they can be just empty words.

For us, establishing a clear model based on research has provided us with a foundation for our work. This roadmap helps to keep us on track. It is easy to drift



away from your core mission, to be beguiled by funding, interesting projects or external pressure. Having a theory of change enables us to hold ourselves to account.

One of the most frequent queries we receive is about evaluation and how it is impossible/boring/unnecessary (delete where applicable). Research and evaluation are areas we have embraced. We share our results and methods, but our biggest lesson learnt is to keep going back to the question: 'Are we really making a difference?' and to try to answer this with curiosity and honesty.

When we share our methodology, whether through projects, resources or training, we aim for these experiences to be not only content based, but to encompass the spirit of how we do things.

### Sharing with care

While People United's mission is a universal theme that has been debated for centuries, the actual essence of how this happens is often small, sensitive and seemingly ordinary: a genuine connection between people.

These connections seep through our work, from an artist wanting a second opinion, a participant unsure of their role, a project manager seeking advice, or a partner needing a listening ear. Our ambitious vision of a kinder society starts with these often invisible, personal moments of care and contact. It is not always easy, but when we are at our best, we see each individual as unique, they feel nurtured and their voice is heard.

It might not grab the headlines, but this care is the lifeblood of People United. As one mentoring participant put it: 'there was a sense of being held – an invisible thread of support, continuity and co-creation that ran like spun gold through the entire programme.'

To conclude, People United's work does not take place in isolation; we are a small part of a wider web. We have an obligation to contribute and learn. For us to continue to support others, we need to continue to be bold about our vision of a kind society; rigorous in holding ourselves to account; and true to our values by being generous and genuine, even if the outcome is unclear – and to remind ourselves:

*"No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted."*<sup>4</sup>

Aesop

“ Change happens not just because of dissatisfaction with the current status quo but with a vision of a better alternative, a destination, hope. ”

# Looking out: our methodology in context

*Wider research on taking care in participatory arts*

## Sue Mayo, artist, researcher and People United Associate

Arts activity that engages with important questions through collaborative and participatory methodologies can be rich and complex, taking place at the intersection of the personal, the political, the familiar, the radical, the quotidian and the extraordinary. In the past 10 years there has been an increase in research into, documentation of, and reflection on this richness. It is important that the complexities of this kind of work are celebrated and interrogated, in ways that do not reduce it to a homogenous field of work but recognise the diversity of methodologies, outcomes and intentions that can be found within it. The voices of participants and artists are increasingly highlighted, often working in partnership with researchers who seek to articulate and frame the discoveries. In this chapter I will point to some of the research areas that have particular relevance to an investigation of how People United works.

## Creative, effective and affective

A tension between the value of the aesthetic and the value of the instrumental runs through much of the discourse on how to describe participatory and collaborative artwork, and this, to an extent, reflects a tension in the making of the work; how do the necessary journey of the art making and the necessary journey of the social engagement match up, and where do they pull in opposite directions? Professor James Thompson, researcher into socially engaged arts, identifies a need and a desire to focus not only on the *effect* of the work but also on the *affect*. If effect is principally about impact and the outcomes of the work, then affect relates to how the work is done and to our emotional, embodied responses.

*“Participation, or engagement with the arts more generally, is said to do things – to have certain identifiable effects.... a sole concentration on social utility is in danger of abandoning the terrain of sensation: of the aesthetic concerns for beauty, joy, awe and astonishment.”<sup>5</sup>*

This re-balancing, not turning away from articulating what is **effective**, but ensuring that the **affective** is also attended to, creates ways of proceeding with the work that are, in the words of choreographer Liz Lerman, ‘broad, mysterious, rigorous, synchronistic, circular and playful’.<sup>6</sup> It can also be identified in the practice of organisations where the organisational aspect of the work – the producers,

the administrative or technical staff – are in close dialogue with artists and artist/ participants. Writing in 2014 about the partnership between producer Anna Ledgard and the artist Mark Storor, I noted:

*“Their partnership is “values-led” and Ledgard works to create the structures and conditions in which the creative work can take place, what Storor describes as “the scaffolding”...both Ledgard and Storor needed to be able to articulate and demonstrate the practical and the aesthetic value, to one another and to the partners who were crucial in enabling these things to happen.”<sup>7</sup>*

Considering both the turn towards affect, and the close collaboration illustrated by the example of Storor and Ledgard, we can see the need for and the value of dialogue between the organisational and the aesthetic, with equal value being given to effect and affect, in a joint creative enterprise.

## Skilled leadership in a complex field

Another area that has received close examination in the past decade is the nature of the skills needed to lead and support collaborative art. Theatre academic Kay Hepplewhite has written extensively on the role of the artist, working in collaboration with partner organisations and with a range of communities. Here, she identifies the qualities an artist will need:

*“Qualities that make up a responsive practitioner are labelled as awareness (of issues relating to context), anticipation and adaptation (being able both to plan and to respond well) attunement, (having an empathetic and informed response to the participants) and respond-ability (where practitioners are able to grow and develop themselves through the work).”<sup>8</sup>*

These qualities are related here to the work, in the room, of an artist of any kind, facilitating others, but they relate equally to all the work of setting up a project, negotiating with partners, and creating a flexible support system. They all relate strongly to an emphasis on listening and responsivity, with dialogue at the heart of the work.

## Working with care ethics

In exploring the often complex work of artists working with sometimes vulnerable groups and individuals, theatre scholars have increasingly turned to feminist readings of the notion of care, particularly the work of political scientist Joan Tronto and psychologist Carol Gilligan. These scholars have examined care in formalised settings, such as hospitals and care homes, as well as in one-to-one relationships, challenging gendered understandings of who does the caring, and linking care to justice. James Thompson writes:

*“The key point for the argument here is that care ethics draws attention to our reciprocal relations with others, or reliance on others, as a source of ethical enquiry. It does not reject justice, but instead calls into question the individualist, atomistic ontology, the liberal-impartial view of persons as “generalised” rather than “concrete”, and the concomitant reliance on abstract moral principles.”<sup>9</sup>*

Thus, care embodies the other-focused activity implicit in the notion of kindness, and is a way of acting, not just a feeling. As with the notion of radical kindness, care ethics as a way of working challenges unjust structures and works in dialogue, rather than being ‘done to’ others.

## Building resilience

Researchers have also pointed to the importance of resilience in practitioners, the capacity to ‘bounce back’ in the face of challenge or difficulty. The desire to be adaptive and dialogic can be personally costly. Scholar Sheila Preston, writing about these demands, draws on research by Arlie Hochschild, where Hochschild describes the ‘emotional labour’ required in public facing jobs. She draws attention to the need to sometimes work hard to maintain the disposition one desires. Preston makes the link with the role of a facilitator:

*“There will be times... when one feels “fake” and even disingenuous, when our actions feel incongruent with our feelings... Moving between roles that feel authentic and inauthentic cannot always be reconciled and can create dissonant feelings that are difficult to manage.”<sup>10</sup>*

Building resilience, and therefore managing this dissonance, is achieved both through attention to individual needs and self-care, but also through the support of others. Hochschild suggests that by 'performing' our values, we can inhabit them, even where there is a contradiction between inner feeling and outer necessity. Where the commitment to a set of values is collective, we can see how the group, our peers, our colleagues, can encourage and support one another to continue to commit to the work of engagement and dialogue, even where there are obstacles. Preston suggests that our attitude to the contradictions is crucial:

*"Awareness of practice as social, constantly performative and responsive enables a critical reflexivity which monitors and notices rather than moralises about the impact on the self."*<sup>11</sup>

All of this research informs an understanding of what, why and how People United does what it does.



# Listening in: our methodology in action

## *What the artists said – matching values with practice*

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### **Sue Mayo, artist, researcher and People United Associate**

Drawing on interviews with artists (all of whose words are in italics), as well as past and present staff members, this section focuses on how People United works. What does everyone do to make sure that the values of the organisation go through it, like words through a stick of rock?

At People United, the vision isn't focused on any one art form or target group or geographical location, but on a core value. This brings its own challenges: how to make kindness real and active within the organisation, not just in its front window? How to respond to negativity or refusal with kindness? People United's core team take on these challenges every day and invite others into this value-focused work with them.

One of the most common responses from artists who have worked with People United was that the core value of the organisation was put into practice at every level:

*Kindness is there in practice in the organisation, which affects all the component parts. It enables you (as an artist) to be alive with it, because they live it – there's a lived awareness.*

All the artists interviewed for this report had been attracted to People United by the focus on kindness, on 'other-focused' behaviours and a desire to build connection, as key themes within the artwork. Most of the artists reported gaining a much deeper understanding of this way of looking at the world and way of being, which enabled them to understand kindness as radical. Etymologically, 'radical' is derived from the word 'root'. What is radical, therefore, both gets to the root of things, and springs from the root, from the part of a plant which gathers nourishment. Without roots a plant dies.

This understanding brings attention to a particular feature of the way in which People United strives to work; that is, for the value of kindness to be congruent across the organisation, not just present in its outputs. One of the artists described this as the labour of kindness. This helps us to understand that this ideal is an ongoing negotiation and one that takes on the challenges noted above, rather than gliding over them. It leads to a very developmental, responsive way of working.

Sarah Fox, People United Associate and former Head of Creative Programmes, writes:

*"It is important that the People United team live the values that we promote. That we take time to listen and are generous in spirit with everyone we work with, each other and ourselves. We are curious and critical, and we want to learn."*<sup>12</sup>

To give some context to this ambition, all the artists spoken to reported experiences of working with organisations which espoused certain values (such as democracy, participation, collaboration, dialogue), but did not always enact them in internal working relationships. It is not an easy thing to do. In conversation with these artists, it was clear we had all found it difficult to stay true to our own values in some working situations. This leads us to consider what it looks like, to live the values that we promote.

Artists and partners engaging with People United saw the outworking of the value of kindness as evident in three particular areas: taking time, giving care and attention, and human relationships. These three are intimately connected, affecting and supporting the others.

## Taking time

*Time is crucial, they take time.*

The most visible aspect of any organisation's work is its output: workshops, events, performances, films, exhibitions and so on. The time to prepare and the time to reflect are not so visible, but the fact that these are a priority for People United is an important part of the embedding of values into the organisation. Artists spoke about the way in which they worked together with and not for People United.

*What matters is their knowledge and understanding of the process. The creative mapping is done together, so you know that they get the process.*

This means having conversations, planning and imagining together from the early stages of any piece of work, time taken during the work to reflect and review, and time taken afterwards to think back through the work and harvest learning from the experience. This is not seen as a luxury but as a necessity and is different from a more commodified relationship where an organisation might bring in a skilled person and leave them to get on with the job. Here, dialogue runs through every piece of work, and this has timetabling and budgetary implications.



*Relational conversation is best, and not just at the end. It needs to run through the project. It's good if you are given a regular space to reflect, and it's [their time] paid.*

People United's artist commissions include an invitation to meet together at the beginning and end of projects:

*"Away Days are vital for People United and are attended by artists, commission partners, researchers, previously commissioned artists and the People United team. We meet for two days at the beginning of the process, and for one day at the end. They are days of practical thinking and reflective contemplation. The final Away Day is a chance to look back and reflect, as well as to look ahead and understand how that particular experience might inform our work going forward." <sup>13</sup>*

These opportunities build breathing space into the work and provide what Caoimhe McAvinchey describes as 'structured spaciousness'.<sup>14</sup> This expression captures the importance of the need to act, in order to create the space that allows for the knowledge that there is time. The space won't happen without the structure.

Conversation and negotiations with partner community groups also contain this crucial, built-in space. Relationality comes because of the time given to build connections and trust, to unearth the challenges and for all parties to be able to reflect and respond. This is time before, during and after. After close involvement with Best Fest,<sup>15</sup> for example, People United focused on mentoring, training and helping to strengthen connections between local people, artists and organisations. They supported the artist-in-residence to raise funds to work in the community for another year, and mentored a local resident, interested in event management, to run the third Best Fest with the support of a steering group. They remain in contact. For those who want it, there is an ongoing relationship and you stay connected.

The choice to build this much time in and around creative projects contributes directly to the search for a way of working with kindness:

*“When we talk about building capacity, often my first thought is about adding, constructing, forming, but this moment reminded me that capacity can be about making space, clearing out the clutter of thoughts and creating more room. Taking care of ourselves as well as all those people we collaborate with helps place us in a position of strength and resilience to be the best we can.”<sup>16</sup>*

## Care and Attention

Care and attention are closely connected to the choice to take time. Socially engaged arts practices are situated in a complex network of relationships and partnerships, in delicate negotiations between aesthetics and purpose, and set against constantly shifting contexts – social, political and personal. To be able to see, and respond to, all of this complexity requires close attention. But paying attention without taking care only gathers information. Poet Mary Oliver writes: ‘Attention without feeling... is only a report. An openness – an empathy – was necessary if the attention was to matter.’<sup>17</sup> This combination of attention and care is another way in which People United is committed to embodying its values. Artists reported that working in this way encouraged them to take notice and reflect, and to face challenges.

*It’s about meeting difficulty with kindness, not looking the other way.*

*It requires you to be mindful yourself – you’re not just a supplier of a commodity.*

Joan Tronto argues that caring is central to our lives and that it should ‘be viewed as a human activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue and repair our “world” so that we can live in it as well as possible.’ This definition underlines the notion of ‘pro-sociality’ that is at the heart of Arts and Kindness, and it encompasses not only the closest working relationships, but also encounters with strangers and short-term relationships with participants, enquirers and care-takers. It is not dependent on reciprocity, although it will often invite a return of care and attention.

*They care about you beyond what you are doing for them.*

Care and attention also allow for the likelihood of sometimes feeling completely lost somewhere along the life of a project, for being overwhelmed or stuck.

When this happens, you may need to take a good look at what's going on. One of the artists defined this as being curious, nosy, and added, it's a privilege. Equally, you may just need to go for a walk (or take a boat down the river) and get away from the concern in order to be able to think.

*"...we wanted to give people time to just stop. We set out a few things they might want to think about on the boat, but there was no obligation to do that, or to share their thoughts. The water was calming and surprisingly still, so mostly we drifted along in silence. At the end of our journey one of the artists thanked us for giving him time to be still and quiet, and it had served as a reminder to him to take better care of himself."*<sup>19</sup>

## Relationships

Art critic Nicolas Bourriaud coined the term 'relational aesthetics', placing art squarely into an interrelated world, rather than set apart.

*"Each particular artwork is a proposal to live in a shared world, and the work of every artist is a bundle of relations with the world, giving rise to other relations, and so on and so forth, ad infinitum."*<sup>20</sup>

This understanding of art as a provoker of, and reflection of, connectedness relates powerfully to the understanding of kindness, which 'arises from a sense of people being connected by force of our common humanity'. Kindness is also 'a proposal to live in a shared world'. Relationships, supported by making time for people and ideas, and paying attention in a 'care-full' way are inextricably woven into the work. Building relationships is reflected in the choice of projects, artist, partners and mentors, and the ongoing relationship with them.

*I had a very thorough interview – they were wanting to be sure, to make sure it was a good fit.*

This continues in the ways of working together:

*Connectedness, support with the thinking. Conversations that don't have to go anywhere.*

And in the artworks themselves:

*The art gives you an excuse to chat, meet, relate. I talked to hundreds of people. I had a reason, an excuse, a licence, a safety. You are a stranger with a reason to be there. People feel safe to engage. People assume you are interested in them, and they're right.*

*I discovered the affinity that is generated by spending 45 minutes together!*

Crucial to all the relationships is listening; not just listening for what you want to hear, but listening to the said and the unsaid, and listening to one's own thoughts and questions. Listening enables relationship, and relationship is the conduit for the lived values. Kindness is therefore a practice (enacted and embodied) rather than a way to feel. In People United, artists commented that this was never earnest, but leavened with humour, risk-taking and a transgressive spirit. The 'how' they do things is often illustrated by examples of what they do – have a cuppa together, go for a walk, make space and time, and keep listening and talking to bring all the processes together. Living the values is a piece of work. As Sarah Fox writes:

*"The care in every interaction, face-to-face or over email, with others or each other, from paying invoices to making handmade gifts, meant that those who joined us in the mission to make the world a better place through arts and kindness felt safe, challenged and part of some bigger thinking."<sup>22</sup>*

As one artist remarked:

*I was worried when I thought we had to make the outcome be about kindness, but I realised it was in the process. That all that is taking place through many small acts of kindness. It's not the same as cheerfulness, it's about taking care.*

# Reflecting: behind the scenes

*On the ground with People United*

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Sarah Fox, People United Associate, and former Head of Creative Programmes

## Kindness at the core

I first understood how kindness would be at the core of People United during my job interview with Tom Andrews, founder of the charity. Tom wanted to see that I shared the value of kindness and that it was at the heart of my working practices. I quickly learnt that he was driven by a strong belief in treating everyone with kindness and care, and his focused leadership built a culture where open-heartedness, empathy and compassion thrived and, importantly, multiplied.

People United is anchored by a group of people who actively practise kindness, and who strive to 'live the values', however challenging it can be at times. It has continued to evolve and shift, as any organisation does; staff, partners, and artists have changed, and projects have begun and ended. Echoes of what came before combine and integrate into the next stages of the organisation's story, but these values remain at the core.

As a creative laboratory, our work is richer for the broadening family of people who care about arts and creativity and how it can be a catalyst for a kinder and more compassionate world. We have grown and fostered a strong values-driven methodology that we have been testing and refining since our beginnings, and it is this I will describe in this chapter.

## Developing a framework – taking our time and listening well

Early on, we established a project structure for our first large-scale community project *We All Do Good Things*: Towns, in Herne Bay, Kent. We planned to deliver the project in five distinct stages, each with its own aims and outcomes: **research, uncover, share, celebrate, and legacy**. In reality there were many crossovers and layers of each stage, but approaching it in this way gave the project momentum and kept us on track. Our learning was plentiful, which was critical to our understanding of how we could work to realise our ambition and mission.

The first step, research, was vital: we worked slowly, spending time getting to know the community, mapping connections between people and organisations, finding community activists, and listening to what people cared about. This deep listening meant we heard different points of view and developed a strong empathy with the town, which strengthened the work and built trust.

## Research and practice – understanding the conditions required for kindness to grow

The aims of *We All Do Good Things* were to increase participation in the arts; trust and neighbourliness; the number of people volunteering; and community connections. To achieve this, we needed a good understanding of what conditions would be required. What did we need to put in place to help encourage a sense of trust and neighbourliness? What art activity might be best to help develop empathy and reduce prejudice? What type of space might support a set of individuals to become a group and develop their connectedness to each other and the community?

Conversations with Professor Dominic Abrams and his team at the Centre for the Study of Group Processes at the University of Kent enabled us to become more familiar with theories and ideas around pro-sociality, social capital, social learning, altruism and social connectedness, and we used this learning to design the project. We were enriched by this relationship as it gave us a new perspective and challenged us to think about the detail of the doing (how it was important we led by example, how we could facilitate the conversation, knowing when it was time to let go and step back) – in order to create the right conditions for learning about each other and for kindness to grow and spread.

During *We All Do Good Things*, this new understanding of what motivates people in their attitudes and behaviours, coupled with our deliberate effort to work quietly and slowly in the town for the first six months, meant that we felt armed with enough information to begin uncovering stories of kindness for the next stage of the project. This began with four artists working alongside four different groups, each exploring different themes.

A young parents' group, for example, explored parental love, working with a textile artist to make blankets. As part of the sharing stage of the project, we brought the four groups together to celebrate, get to know each other and share their work. It was also an opportunity to launch the project to the wider town. As a sharing and launch event it worked very well, but we noticed that the process of bringing the four groups together could have been better. Naturally, each group tended to stay with the people they already knew, so the interactions were limited and light touch.

After that we were more careful in planning how gently to encourage people to connect with others, and we have learnt since that this takes time and a lot of patience. Using an intellectual application of kindness, as well as an emotional and practical one, to understand how people connect in the world, made a difference to how people engaged with us, the project and each other.

## Starting with a positive, inclusive theme – everyone can tell a story of kindness

*We All Do Good Things* aimed to share and celebrate the good that people do. We so often hear bad or negative news and had learned from earlier work that there is power in starting with a positive theme. We explored what would happen if we began by highlighting examples of what people were already doing to make the world a better place.

We discovered that everybody has a story of kindness, however small or grand; of how it feels when someone is kind to us, or when we are kind to someone else. It is an inclusive theme and a collection of stories can build quickly. From then, the tougher aspects of people's lives began to emerge, and there were trickier conversations about the absence of kindness and how that feels. We have since explored all sorts of ideas that are connected to kindness with all sorts of people, from young carers who shared what empathy, and the lack of it, meant for them, to visitors to the Southbank Centre who, in an exploration around micro-moments of connection in public spaces, shared their answers to the question 'what would prompt you to talk to a stranger?'. Our work is a collection of stories that enable a better understanding of similarities and differences, and the inclusivity of the theme is significant in that process.

## Legacies: new initiatives, connections and relationships

It is important to People United that there continue to be echoes of the work for as long as possible. We want people to be reminded of their experiences, to continue to be inspired, and to be able to inspire others.

At the end of *We All Do Good Things*, several new initiatives were developed. Some of these were planned early on and their development was managed by People United – such as establishing a community beach hut to provide a quiet reflection space for individuals and groups. Some, on the other hand, were led by the community – such as the continuation of the annual Giant Picnic, a large-scale community gathering that promoted the positive work taking place in the town.

Provocative and thoughtful artwork is often shared more widely: for example, artists Sarah Cole and Annis Joslin (*Self-Identity*. Artist Commission, 2018) have exhibited the work made with partners, *Joining Hands Joining Hearts*, at Fabrica in Brighton and discussed it at the 2018 Social Art Summit in Sheffield. All the resources we produce come directly from the processes, outcomes and research involved in the work we have made. Our *Navigating with Kindness* map is an example of how we want to share our learning, generate conversation and spark different ways of thinking.

Often, ongoing relationships develop with the people who participate, including partners, associates, artists and funders, individuals, organisations and communities. Those who share our outlook and continue to be inquisitive about this work have become part of the 'People United family', as one artist put it. Previous staff members and artists are now trusted friends, sounding-boards, associates and advocates. This family is expanding all the time and our learning is continually enriched with new connections, work and voices.

Connections also often continue between artists and partners, and between artists and the people who participate. Nova Marshall, for example, our artist-in-residence during *The Best of Us* (our second large-scale, long-term community project) continues to work independently with the community of Newington and Newington Big Local to deliver a youth arts club and Best Fest. This ongoing relationship means the arts are now visible to the community, and in 2019, Newington was chosen as one of only 14 communities across England to receive significant funding as part of the Creative Civic Change programme.

## The trickier bits – sometimes it can feel like wading through mud

Although we can see each area of methodology as distinct, they are always interconnected, rarely linear, and often challenging. It can be a struggle to make participatory work because it is messy and unpredictable – but that's what makes it exciting too. We must take risks and be flexible, particularly when time and resources are short. We also need to persevere and have a sense of humour when things don't go to plan.

One of our trickier challenges has been working with people who don't always share the People United values – who might work in opposition to them, find them suspicious, or mistake them for weakness. We try to rise to this challenge



and take our time to properly consider whether it's appropriate to push forward, sometimes with a difficult conversation, take a step back or even let go. No two situations are the same. Sometimes different aims and values can travel together, sometimes it's more difficult. We try to respond to this kind of challenge with curiosity, not judgement, modelling kindness and empathy so others might be inspired to do the same. We also have to challenge our own feelings of frustration and disappointment because failure can feel very personal when you care about the work, and the people, deeply.

We've learnt that it takes strength and courage to be resolute in 'living our values'. We've learnt too that taking care of ourselves is of paramount importance because it can be difficult to show kindness and compassion when we feel stressed, stretched and exhausted. Sometimes we don't believe we have the capacity to go the extra mile, or the time and energy to carefully consider our actions. Sometimes the process can feel like wading through mud.

## **It's beyond brilliant when you get to the top of the mountain**

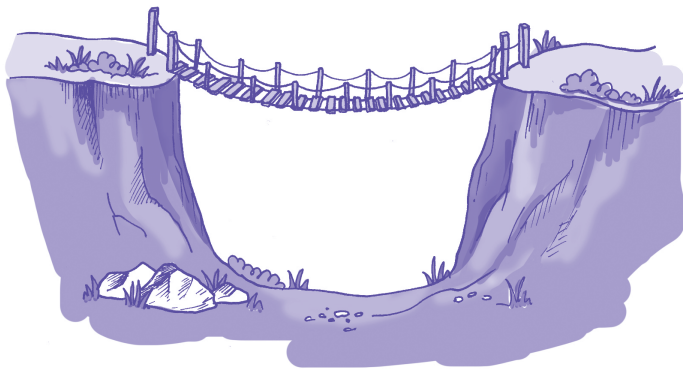
There have been many flashes of joy, profound moments of kindness and compassion and a real sense of positive change – times when someone has gained a new perspective, had a light-bulb moment, or grown a more positive outlook about themselves and their life. Or when we genuinely share values with others and it quickly builds a strong foundation for making outstanding artwork with people. It is brilliant when we get to the top of a mountain together and see the landscape beyond where it all feels connected, authentic and optimistic.

This is only possible when there has been a healthy respect between everyone involved and a genuine acknowledgement of the experiences and skills everyone brings. People and projects thrive when there is space for disagreement and difference, but it needs to be handled with care and compassion rather than distrust, bias or even exclusion. There can be tension between a values-driven, collaborative process and a clear aesthetic-led vision, but open and honest communication helps to ease this. We have regular phone calls and meetings with artists and partners to keep in touch, and our away days are deliberate moments in a project or commission, taken for reflection and discussion, prodding and challenging each other to make the best work we can.

## Decision making, saying no and navigating our own path

During the first decade of People United, we developed a set of criteria to help us to make clear, meaningful choices. The criteria – a series of questions – enable us to interrogate our decision-making. It asks what the need or crisis is, and what People United might offer; whether there are enough resources to deliver a high-quality arts experience and artwork; how the work will support our mission; and if it will help to increase kindness within systems, institutions, communities or individuals. It asks if the partners are driven by the same or similar values and if the project will activate one or more of the mediators that we talk about in our work: connections, emotions, values and learning. There are also questions around legacies and the artwork. Despite feeling a sense of excitement at the endless and wonderful possibilities open to us, if we found several of the answers to these core questions were no, then we had to decline a project, or explore how we might modify it to fit our criteria.

We don't want to be evangelical – all organisations, communities and projects have their own values and passions: their own DNA. For us, the checklist helps to keep us on track. The strong values-driven culture founded in the very early days of the organisation, the development of a tried and tested methodology (and a willingness to keep trying and keep testing), the consistent application of research and self-reflection and a hands-on approach to kindness, have all helped us to navigate and negotiate our own path to where we are now. From all this we are creating a strong collection of projects and commissions, a body of work that has integrity and focus, and which demonstrates a compelling vision of how, together, arts and kindness can inspire a compassionate, more caring world.



# Commissioning with kindness

*Creating and delivering artist commissions*

Liz Flynn, Head of Creative Programmes, People United

## Creating with kindness

People United's artist commissions aim to explore and illuminate themes of kindness through the creation of extraordinary new work. Each commission is unique, curious and exploratory by nature. The thread between them is the hope that they will have a wide-reaching and deep impact on the:

- **Artist:** by putting the conditions in place for their work to thrive, take risks and explore new areas; by offering support, sharing our methodology and demonstrating People United's core values, in the hope that this experience will resonate within, and further develop, the artist's participatory practice.
- **Participants:** by providing experiences that will have a deep and meaningful impact; by offering the opportunity to co-create work with a professional artist(s); by facilitating discussion that will foster understanding and realise commonalities between each other; and by experiencing high quality activities that create lasting, positive memories.
- **Public:** by enabling the creation of artwork that clearly communicates the commissioned theme and is delivered in such a way that it resonates with those who see it on meaningful, collaborative or unexpected levels. We hope that audiences will be inspired, challenged, intrigued and encouraged to reflect on themselves and their own approach to the theme.

Our commission themes represent or are derived from kindness and pro-social behaviour; that is, values that are considered positive attributes within personal ethics, such as courage, integrity, love or forgiveness. Each commission focuses on one of these attributes, and through it we explore what the word, in its many contexts, means to each of us. We want our commissions to inspire positive change, to spark imagination and generate ideas. We want them to show how powerful it can be to choose to act in an empathetic, compassionate and pro-social way.

To do this we share stories – of our experiences, our thoughts, the different meanings and connotations of the theme and what this value or behaviour might look like in practice. We always choose a theme that is universal so that everyone can respond to it in some way, and then we research it, test the limits of what it can mean, and explore how it relates to kindness. Most importantly, we do all of this together, through the arts and creative practice. We make and play, we create and imagine, and we use the freedom this brings to help us explore and express our ideas and values, wherever that may take us. We open up conversation and keep opening it further. This reveals what we have in common, draws us together, deepens our shared understanding and enables long-lasting change.

## Case study: 'Self-Identity' artist commission

*Self-Identity* was developed in partnership with Optivo, a housing association, and *Joining Hands Joining Hearts*, a charity and support network for women who have experienced domestic abuse. The charity is based in Kemsley in Sittingbourne, Kent.

Every artist commission we undertake is bespoke and developed in response to the partners' and participants' needs. To do this we work hard to ensure there is full 360° participation throughout the project; for example, each workshop is designed to be appropriate to each group, fully accessible, inclusive and flexible and we strive to make sure that all voices are heard and listened to. Co-design is at the heart of our approach, ensuring both our partners and participants are a key part of the creative development and project planning from the outset.

The choice of artist for each commission has to reflect and respond to the theme, but also the needs and ambitions of all those involved, so at the beginning of the *Self-Identity* commission we took plenty of time to understand and listen to the participants before we started the process of artist selection.

*Joining Hands Joining Hearts* and Optivo sat on the interview panel for the artist selection and together we chose visual artist Sarah Cole and artist/film maker Annis Joslin, who applied for the commission as a duo. Both artists are highly experienced in participatory practice, which was demonstrated through their playful, experimental and open approach. Both their proposal and interview showed that instead of creating pre-determined workshop plans, they would come to each session armed with ideas and tools that the group could use to experiment, develop and grow. This, alongside a clear demonstration that they would be comfortable with shifts in direction and could respond to moments of inspiration, made them the perfect fit for the commission, and importantly for the group of participants. Their immediate connection with the group, and their tacit understanding of the light and shade to be found in the theme of self-identity, laid the foundations from the start for a profoundly impactful partnership.

We started the process with a group **Away Day**, which brought all the partners, participants and artists together. Our Away Days always span two days with a celebratory meal in between, creating an opportunity for us all to get to know each other outside the workshop or office environment. People United facilitates discussions and short workshops around everybody's expectations for the project – what it needs to achieve, what we would personally like to get from the experience, what might change as a result, where we foresee opportunities, and the risks and potential issues to resolve.

We make sure everyone has the opportunity to share their experiences and expectations openly, and to express their concerns and their personal needs. This might include what individual ideas of success look like, what the different skills within the group are, what their hopes and fears may be – and how we can make sure that these are all accommodated. We do this in a relaxed and fun way: People United Away Days are playful and rarely based around a table. We use group work and individual sessions, creative play, mindful walks, meaningful discussion, and of course, there is unlimited tea and cake.

Our commissions are often a step into the unknown. We are curious, excited and keen to explore, but we try not to start with too many prescribed outcomes as we passionately believe that the artist and participants should have creative freedom to explore the theme without People United trying to push it in a predetermined direction. It follows that we rarely ask for the final work to be presented in a specific way, and for the first couple of months we focus instead on supporting and encouraging the process; getting to know each other, pushing and enabling creative exploration, sharing experiences and bonding as a group. Many sessions are, of course, about developing and making work, but others might be mostly conversation. We encourage this ebb and flow because our work is about bringing people closer together and celebrating commonality, and our research shows that this is achieved not only by making together, but by enjoying experiences together, talking together and sharing stories.

This approach isn't always easy. Stepping into the unknown is exciting but can sometimes feel uncomfortable and uncertain. Not having a set outcome at the beginning can also make it more difficult to articulate the project fully, which can be tricky if, for example, a commission is being funded in a particular way and there is a requirement to define outputs and outcomes at a much earlier stage. Like most things, however, we've found this is almost always resolvable through open dialogue and mutual understanding.

Which is not to say that measuring success by outputs and outcomes, by setting clear goals and heading towards them, is not important to People United – because it is. It's just that our goal is not just to produce high-quality artwork, but to create, manage and nourish the experiences of those taking part and the relationships they develop. In other words, engaging the four mediators of the Arts & Kindness model: emotions, connections, learning and values.

To do this, we need to invest in the environment, in the method of delivery and in all the people involved. It is really important that people have a 'good time', so having fun is valued highly by all of us – it can make people feel more connected,

more comfortable and it is often the space where friendships develop and trust builds. Sometimes it's the permission to enjoy themselves that opens gates to more meaningful change and creates the conditions for a profound and tangible impact to be made. For some this might be a tiny shift, for others it could be life changing. Either way, we cannot steer the ship alone, which is why we invest the time and energy into really getting to know all the people in the room.

We also need to understand and recognise the times we need to be really present and when we need to **step back**. We do not try to orchestrate a particular atmosphere; we just constantly respond to the needs in front of us and keep making small adjustments in response. It isn't easy because every project, every artist, every group of partners and participants is different. Most of all it's about listening keenly to others and not making the project about our own ambitions. It's about talking and **taking things slowly** – and above everything it's about finding the joy in spending time together.

In the first few weeks we focus on creating the right conditions to build trust and an environment that is fun, open, safe and full of laughter. This includes everything from selecting where the workshops will be held, to the layout of the space, ease of accessibility, and making sure participants feel welcome and comfortable each time they come together.

Of course, there will be good weeks and bad weeks. Everybody who has ever been involved in a collaborative project will recognise that. Times when the group are giddy and thriving, and other times when they will feel stuck, frustrated or upset. We've learnt that this can be overcome by not focusing too intently on the end goal, and instead taking the time to look at the concern right in front of us. We make sure everyone continues to feel **welcome**, that the environment is still working and that the workshop format is still right for the needs of the group. We ensure that the artists have all the support they need – be that more People United staff on the ground, more volunteers, additional resources, more planning time or mentor support, and we check back on this balance continually as we know needs can change or evolve over the life of the project.

Ultimately, we consistently bring the focus back to making work, having fun, reflecting and learning. We **celebrate** the big and small achievements. We let everything else come in time.

The artists, Sarah and Annis, took time and care to create a strong bond with the partners and participants of Self-Identity, always staying late after workshops to take part in the long group lunches that were part of Joining Hands Joining Hearts' custom and even coordinating a night of camping. This dedication and connection

went beyond the requirements of the commission, but their commitment to the participants and the project was rewarded. The women bonded with the two artists remarkably quickly, and together they created a safe space where the women gradually felt able to open up, both creatively and emotionally, sharing their personal stories and experiences with fellow members of the group.

People United's role is about providing the right conditions for the artist to flourish. Sometimes this can mean managing commissions in a hands-on way, with at least one team member on the ground who can play an active role as **listening ear**, making sure everybody is comfortable and has refreshments, and generally **paying attention** to the needs in the room. This ensures the artist can focus on the delivery of the workshop and means we are always there to listen and respond. However, this is not always needed, and in the case of *Self-Identity*, as many of the women were understandably private about their past experiences, we knew that this commission would better suit a different approach.

We spoke with the artists about our observations, reflected on our role and on the needs of the participants and we concluded that, on this occasion, we should **step back** from attending the weekly sessions and support the project from a distance. Making it clear that we would always be willing and available to meet or talk with the group at any time, we continued to support the artists, Sarah and Annis, directly, to realise their ideas by playing a producer role where needed. We kept in touch with the group too, connecting them with the participants of our concurrent commission, Home, and we also co-organised and co-hosted their final celebration – a screening of the films made during the project (and of course, we helped with logistics and administration between workshops too).

As with all our commissions, *Self-Identity* was a balancing act. We often tread a thin line between stepping in and stepping back, and which way we choose to move depends on myriad subtle and changing contexts, from the needs of the group and the expectations of our partners, to the experience of the artist and the production needs of the work being created. When I reflected on this particular project, I saw how important it had been to take time to consider the unique needs of this group of women properly during the planning stages. Taking time, right at the start, to make sure we **talked together** about our different perspectives, made future, potentially harder, conversations easier.

I also learnt the importance of providing external support for the artists, staff and other partners. Working around traumatic experiences and personal vulnerability is a difficult space to hold, and handling this level and depth of emotion can have a big impact on those leading and supporting a project. To help navigate

this, People United offer all artists a **mentor** to provide a **listening ear**, creative feedback and an opportunity to **slow down, reflect and evaluate** progress. We also put in place support outside the project, whose expertise can be used if needed. As we move forward, building on the experience and learning from *Self-Identity*, we've realised that the People United team also need support from time to time, depending on the nature of the project, and this is something we'll consider at the start of future projects. It is easy to forget that we need to show care and kindness to ourselves too.

As People United evolves and looks forward to the future, our methodologies will evolve too. Every project changes us a little and has an impact on how we go forward. *Self-Identity* reminded us that we do not always have to be on the ground, directly delivering. We learnt that we can support and steer from a distance, nourishing **the relationships** and ensuring the project stays true to our values without always being physically present. This was an important lesson for our future development. For a long time, we've thought of ourselves as a catalyst and now, increasingly, we are investigating how we can replicate, scale-up and extend our reach. Our 'learnings' from *Self-Identity* put our plans for this journey on a surer footing.





# A light in the darkness

*The Best of Us (Newington, Ramsgate 2015-2017)*

**Becky Vincer, Creative Programmes Coordinator, People United**

**With Nova Marshall, artist and Simone Crouchman, Best of Us Creative Champion**

## *About the Best of Us*

*The Best of Us* was a three-year neighbourhood project in Newington, Ramsgate, developed in partnership with Newington Big Local. Delivered with the support of artist-in-residence Nova Marshall, the project sought to increase social cohesion, encourage social action and nurture the creative potential of residents.

The project was a big undertaking for People United and involved working with Nova and the community to develop an intensive programme of events and activities over the three-year period.

One of the cornerstones of the project was the early establishment of an intergenerational group of 'Creative Champions' who were involved across the whole programme and, importantly, advocated for *The Best of Us* in the wider community. Made up of residents spanning ages from three to 60, this group met weekly to take part in artist-led workshops, to create artwork, to go on trips to galleries and museums, to undertake training and, ultimately, to create Newington's first ever community arts festival, *Best Fest*. The first festival saw 500 people actively take part, and the community have continued to organise and develop an event every year since, offering an annual day for celebration, creativity and connection for local people.

This short piece focuses on Newington's Creative Champions – how they developed as a group, how we collectively navigated *The Best of Us* together, and the impact their involvement had on them.

*"The Best of Us was about caring and sharing, but even more about art being the route for a lot of people into finding new friendships and finding confidence."*

Participant

## **In the beginning**

Before any sessions took place, People United worked with Nova to spark interest in *The Best of Us* and encourage people to join in. We used a number of routes to make initial connections into the community, including taking an interactive stall at the local primary school community day and attending Newington Big Local

meetings to get to know residents. We distributed postcards in person and via community venues and we visited the local youth club and Girlguiding groups. Crucially, we formed a good relationship with the community centre manager and together we planned how we could work with their existing programme of activities. We also used social media – starting a Facebook page which was shared and supported by Newington Big Local and engaging with Facebook groups linked to Newington and Ramsgate. All these activities generated local interest, provided information and started to build relationships.

## Collaboration at the heart

*“Everyone can take the journey at their own pace.”*

Artist-in-residence, Nova Marshall

From the outset, co-creation and collaboration was at the heart of *The Best of Us*. Nova did not dictate the outcome of workshops – she brought exciting materials for Creative Champions to work with and encouraged participants to develop their own responses and interpretations. There were always instructions for those who wanted guidance and reassurance, but ‘art rebels’ were actively encouraged, and all participants were invited to bring forward their own ideas and suggestions.

Initially these ideas were quite straightforward and very practical – somebody wanted more stickers, another person wanted to try different paper, everybody wanted chocolate biscuits! No matter how small the request, we ensured these things were brought along the next week. Being responsive in this way was important, because it built trust and demonstrated to the Creative Champions that their ideas and needs were being taken seriously; they were being listened to.

As their confidence and excitement grew, so did their ambition. Their requests became bolder and much more ambitious. It wasn’t long before Nova was helping the Creative Champions to write mini project plans and create shopping lists to bring their ideas to life, and as the project grew, other artists were invited along to support and provide specialist knowledge in puppet making, graffiti, music, dance and singing.

The freedom to experiment enabled people to flourish, and for some the journey towards creative confidence and ownership was rapid. For others, it took more time. One of our key roles through this process was to make sure the group always knew that they were in a safe place – somewhere they could experiment, fail and try again, where all their ideas and comments were valued and where everyone’s input was equally celebrated.

## Young people and kindness

The local youth club provision in Newington changed during *The Best of Us* project, with this came an increase in the number of young people attending the weekly Creative Champions sessions, who were now in need of a new place to socialise. Capturing the attention of Newington's young people proved pivotal to *The Best of Us* and to the legacy of Creative Champions. When they started to see for themselves something exciting was going on, that something was changing and growing, everyone wanted to join in and play a part.

*"I've been in Young Creative Champions for a year and a half...  
At first I was shy but now I'm really confident."*

Young Creative Champion

Newington's 'Young Creative Champions' were, and continue to be, fundamental to the development and delivery of events such as Best Fest, which really focused their energy. They were passionate about bringing together their family, friends and neighbours to share the artwork they'd created – but also just to make and welcome them to a fun event right on their doorstep.

They embraced the theme of kindness, taking it seriously and contemplating it deeply during the weekly workshops. They also understood it in a simple, everyday context – for example that 'being nice to people' meant people may be nicer to you and you'd have more friends to have a good time with. On a practical and emotional level, this became part of navigating adolescence and working out who they wanted to hang out with and why people wanted to hang out with them.

Over the course of *The Best of Us*, this group of young people learned new creative skills, grew in self-confidence, developed their social and emotional intelligence through peer learning and began to set and achieve ambitious goals. Even more importantly, they felt proud of themselves and proud of the community they'd helped to create.

*"I enjoy watching the Young Creative Champions behaving in a manner that isn't necessarily the way they always behave. I think *The Best of Us* brings out the best of them and that I find inspiring."*

Participant

Sometimes the impact of the project could be seen in the small interactions and other times there were bigger moments of growth. We celebrated all positive change, whatever the scale – the individual who was a little disruptive, then made positive choices to enable them to become a compere at Best Fest, the initially reluctant teenager who became the one who always arrived early to help set-up, and the one who stole a glittery pencil on the first day but who later became engrossed and ambitious and pushed themselves to achieve a challenging Arts Award.

One of the reasons the Young Creative Champions group was so successful – on every level – was the consistent support for, commitment to and encouragement of the young people's development. Like many of People United's artists, Nova took on a role that went far beyond her contract and ultimately, she became a friend, mentor and role model for the young people. Nova helped the group to take themselves seriously, for example together they created 'rules' for the club and developed pledges to uphold their values of the group. Everybody signed these together. The rules included 'no swearing' but also 'being kind to each other', a value and intention that became embedded in *The Best of Us* project.

## Legacy

Over time the Creative Champions evolved into a weekly youth group called 'Chill Club', which became an important legacy of *The Best of Us*. Chill Club has a focus on arts, creativity and community leadership and is still led by Nova. The legacy of Best Fest is also visible, as it has evolved into the community's own annual celebration of creativity and connection for local people, led by Newington Big Local, and Chill Club has gone on to achieve a three-year funding package from Children in Need.

My own experience of *The Best of Us* and Chill Club was thankfully not just from the distance of an office desk, and I was able to support on the ground regularly. The project started around the same time that I joined People United as a Project Assistant. To begin with, I assumed my role was to be busy 'at the back', quietly making sure everything was tidy or cups of tea were made. However, I soon realised that the most important place I could be was simply 'there' – present and available for anyone who wanted to have a conversation, usually while we were making art alongside each other. It was in those moments that I learnt the most about the people involved in the project and the kind of community they wanted to nurture. Although I didn't quite realise it at the time, being part of *The Best of Us* was also helping me to decide my own career choices moving forward. I had studied sculpture at university and always wondered what to do next – being a Fine Artist never felt quite right. It was only when I was there

on the ground as part of the People United team, delivering creative work with the community, that I realised what an impact this work could have and how transformative it could be. I witnessed the transformation and inspiration *The Best of Us* brought to so many of the people involved. Working as part of People United alongside Nova and the Creative Champions helped me to realise who I am. I'm a community artist.

The experience of working as an artist on *The Best of Us* was a turning point for Nova too, expressed here in her own words:

*"The Best of Us had a really deep impact on me, both personally and in how I consider myself as an artist. Before The Best of Us I felt a bit lost as a practitioner; I used to think I don't really make stuff so what kind of artist can I be? I'd developed and delivered arts in education, but at the time of applying to be The Best of Us artist, I wasn't sure of my own direction. Working on the project enabled me to see that participation is what's crucial for me. People United gave me the confidence to explore ways of working with others collaboratively – co-production, co-authorship, those sorts of things. That was, and continues to be, of real value. It's what we're always aiming to achieve in Newington. It's about us all being on an equal level."*

Nova Marshall, artist

The distance we both travelled is mirrored by the journeys undertaken by many of the participants. That sense of discovery and growth in confidence is captured beautifully in Creative Champion Simone's reflection on her experience of *The Best of Us*:

*"I was drawn to The Best of Us by the arts on offer. But it was baby steps. Just a bit at a time. Sometimes just being present in the room was enough, other times I really engaged and got on. You didn't have to talk to people if you didn't need to or didn't want to. You could just be there. My idea of art was limited, I just thought of it as drawing really. The Best of Us expanded my idea of art in so many ways and it became about everything; you know, environment, absolutely everything."*

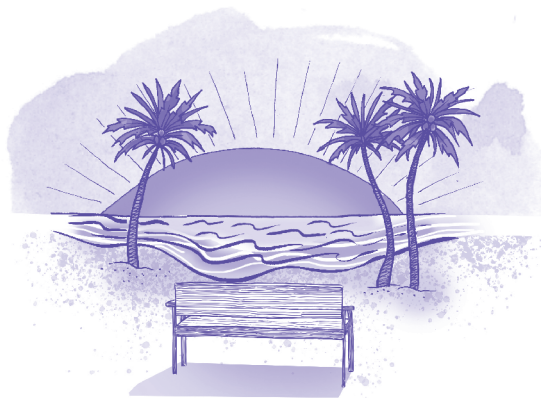
*I've seen individuals growing in stature and in confidence as a result of The Best of Us. That's the legacy – helping individuals change, appreciate more, be understanding, be less judgemental.*

*I was treated like an equal, not looked down on. I think the world of art is quite snooty sometimes, but with The Best of Us everybody started at the bottom of the mountain, we all learnt new skills. Some people go to the top. Some people are half-way up. But everybody who started at the bottom is somewhere further up that hill. I started off in a really bad place and I ain't running yet, but I ain't crawling either. I'm walking now.*

*Whatever form of art people do, whatever form it takes, whether it be movement, drawing or whatever, I would say art is very therapeutic and it takes people to a greater place...*

*Art takes you from the darkness into the light."*

Simone Crouchman, Creative Champion, Newington



# Navigating with Kindness

*Sharing the learning, changing the landscape*

Tina Corri, Liz Flynn and Janice McGuinness

## Sharing the learning

People United is a learning organisation and one that aspires to be useful. We are keen to share our processes openly, to exchange knowledge practically, to listen to and learn from others, and to grow a community of practice around arts and kindness. On that basis, to sit alongside *Taking Care*, we have developed a practical, interactive companion resource, *Navigating with Kindness*, that we hope will be useful to anyone who is involved with, or interested in, delivering values-led participatory arts projects. In turn, we hope you will share your experience, observations and 'learnings' with us and each other.

## Using Navigating with Kindness

*Navigating with Kindness* is not a 'how to' guide and nor is it a 'to-do' list. We know that all contexts and projects are different and complex; one size can rarely fit all, and you are the experts in your settings. Instead, the resource shows the different processes and approaches that People United use when developing and delivering projects and captures the different ways that these might play out.

## The map

We have tried to share our learning and approaches in an artist-designed landscape with features that reflect the different kinds of journeys, scenarios and terrains we might experience in any project.

## The cards

*Navigating with Kindness* contains 20 cards that capture key elements of our methodology, providing questions, conversation starters and prompts to help keep kindness in mind through all phases of a project. Each of the cards represents the steps we might take and decisions we might make along the way, but they are not a checklist, they can be used in any order and each one can be returned to as often as necessary.

The cards are intended to be signposts, to be used in any way that works for you – to help plan a route or as way-signs along the road, perhaps at critical junctions, to offer suggestions for questions, reflections or actions to consider.

Whatever your context, we hope the approaches will ring true and provide some helpful pauses for thought as you journey through your projects. We'd be really interested to hear if and how this has worked for you, and particularly what new prompts you add to the blank cards in the pack.



## Core elements of People United's methodology

Our tried and tested methodology has defined components (research and deep listening, a positive and inclusive theme, co-creating, working slowly, taking risks, sharing and celebrating, and building in legacies), underpinned by taking care, paying attention and nurturing relationships throughout. But it is not linear, nor equally applied – it is often backtracked, fast forwarded, revisited, questioned or paused – and the balance is different for every project. This makes it surprisingly difficult to write down, which is why, throughout this report, we have tried to 'show' People United's methodology through examples, case studies and reflections.

These key elements and the way we use them have been described and shared throughout Taking Care and they can all be distilled back into a number of core components that make up the foundation of our methodology. These are summarised opposite:



## Research and deep listening

Where are the positives? What are the concerns? What change is needed? What are the group needs? What are the artist's needs? What theme will you explore – is it positive and inclusive?



## Take your time

Work carefully – how can the project be optimised for everyone taking part? Don't expect changes overnight. Know that confidence, genuine connections and trust take time to build.



## Be flexible and open to change

Sometimes plans don't work out, projects don't evolve in the way we might expect them to – and sometimes kindness can be complex. Be ready to adapt and manage everyone's expectations within this – including your own.



## Share and celebrate

Don't forget to celebrate important moments, both large and small, and have fun! Some of our most genuine moments of connection and empathy come from silliness, play and sharing joyful occasions together.



## Build in legacies

Find a future and a legacy for everybody's hard work – considering from the start what might come next, what might be left behind, or what needs to be expanded or embedded. Build networks, share, connect and create the conditions for the next steps to be taken, often with new partners.



## Keep your values at the core

Always be honest and open. Try to keep your sense of humour. Be confident in using words like compassion, empathy and kindness. We have found that people respond to them and feel empowered. Sometimes people feel relieved that they are in a place of warmth – of safety. There is real strength in admitting the power of being good to each other. Be fearlessly kind!

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**Take care of the relationships**

Think about how you are feeding and encouraging the relationships on which collaborative work is based.

Are you making room for everyone's diverse skills?

Do you need to make any adjustments to accommodate someone's skill set?

Can you be more generous with time, encouragement, tea, chats or your attention?

  
People United  
Creating a kinder world



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