



HEART OF GLASS (ST HELENS)

CREATIVE
AND PEOPLE
PLACES

NON-ARTS PARTNERSHIPS



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Heart of Glass: For the love of.
Photo: Stephen King

HEART OF GLASS

WWW.HEARTOFGLOSS.ORG.UK

CASE STUDY THEME

> Non-arts partnerships

PROJECT SUMMARY

Heart of Glass is an ambitious new programme of arts and cultural activity for St Helens. The programme aims to place the town's unique cultural heritage at its core and to explore how the arts can make a contribution to creating a new cultural identity for St Helens.

“Our philosophy is about creating ambitious, collaborative and participatory art projects that question the world we inhabit and to create new spaces for debate and exploration.” Heart of Glass

Heart of Glass is one of 21 Creative People and Places (CPP) programmes funded by Arts Council England. It was established as a collaborative programme of action research, which brings together a unique consortium of organisations including Saints Community Development Foundation (St Helens Rugby Football Club), Helena Partnerships, St Helens Arts Partnership (comprising the Citadel, the World of Glass and Platform Artists), St Helens Council Arts and Music Services, FACT (Foundation for Art and Creative Technology) and community representatives.

Drawing on interviews with the Heart of Glass staff team and its partners, this case study explores non-arts partnerships in practice and focuses on the impact and outcomes of the programme. It further examines the approaches that are considered to be good practice and unpicks the building blocks for success and programme sustainability.



Heart of Glass: A Guinea A Box. Photo: Stephen King

KEY FINDINGS

- › Heart of Glass has a team of committed partners both within and outside of the arts, and it successfully collaborates with a wide network of partners at different levels - locally, regionally and nationally - to deliver its artistic programme.
- › As a consortium, Heart of Glass is passionate about creating meaningful and thought-provoking art projects which are rooted in the specifics of the place and community they are working with.
- › Working as a partnership has enabled Heart of Glass to have a strong strategic focus and to ensure that sustainability is built-in as an integral part of the programme to maximise the legacy opportunities.



Heart of Glass: *Silent Night / And, on that Note*. Photo: Stephen King

INTRODUCTION

According to Heart of Glass, St Helens is a “unique and fascinating place”. It’s a place which is renowned for its rugby success and has a rich history of innovation and industry, from pharmaceuticals, glass, coal, linen, to brick production. There is a strong sense of heritage, built around family dynasties such as Beechams, Proctor and Gamble, and Pilkington Glass. However, post-industrial St Helens has never quite recovered from the collapse of all of its factories. St Helens today is characterised by higher than average levels of deprivation, long-term unemployment and mental health issues.

“There’s a whole kind of complexity around the place, people and civic identity.

**The people of St Helens are comfortable talking about the past,
but to have a conversation about tomorrow that’s less comfortable,**

because that’s unknown.” Heart of Glass

For Heart of Glass, it was important to have a firm grasp of the “multi-layered set of understandings” around civic pride and the identity of the place. This allowed the team to be able to build a programme which felt authentic and real, which was connected and rooted in the place, but also in the small townships of St Helens which have their own hyper-localised identities.

Although St Helens has a low level of engagement with the arts, this is largely due to a lack of supply, rather than a lack of demand. According to St Helens Council Arts and Music Services, St Helens had a “frustrated, isolated and underground arts scene.” There is a need for greater investment, opportunity, and variety in St Helens’ arts and cultural offer. In terms of the arts infrastructure in St Helens, Heart of Glass conducted an initial mapping of the sector and found around 157 individuals or small groups with a specific art-form focus, most, if not all were unfunded. There are also no Arts Council England funded National Portfolio organisations based in St Helens or in the wider footprint of the region working strategically in St Helens.

**“What has been missing is a real strong sense of artist practice in our professional
sector to interface with that really engaged community and voluntary arts sector,**

**what’s been missing is a professional sector. People had to go to Manchester or Liverpool
for what they would term as high quality arts experiences.” Heart of Glass**

APPROACH TO NON-ARTS PARTNERSHIPS

The approach to the local programme involves working across a broad spectrum of art forms and to actively develop different models of working that include artist led, community led and producer led. It brings together a diverse line-up of partners both within the arts and outside the arts, from regeneration, health, adult social care, cultural diversity, young people, older people and supported housing. The Heart of Glass programme is a diverse portfolio of activities including 30 small prototype projects, local artists working with community partners, artist residencies, professional development opportunities to help local artists to develop their practice, and small, medium and large scale commissions.

“What makes a Heart of Glass project is the sense of ambition and something new happening.

There’s a sense of relationship between artist, community and place.” Heart of Glass

The lead partner, Saints Community Development Foundation, is already involved in numerous community engagement projects through their charity work which supports around 50,000 people a year. The Foundation’s approach is to use rugby as tool for introducing arts and culture to the community, and to creatively use Langtree Park stadium as a cultural venue, for large scale events such as *Silent Night / ‘And, on that Note’* and *For the love of*, a photographic exhibition installed on the concourse of the stadium that celebrated the grassroots heroes that contribute to the running of the Community Rugby League clubs.

There are four key elements that shape the Heart of Glass programme and which are regarded as the touchstone for all its projects:

- › Firstly, that great art is to be made and presented in St Helens, with Heart of Glass playing a significant role within that.
- › Secondly, that the arts in a broader sense are a force for change, for creating a critical mass and having a voice at the decision making table.
- › Thirdly, for art to be a recognisable element of civic life, so that there are a multitude of ways that people can participate in the arts, as a ticket buyer, collaborator, commissioner or funder.
- › Fourthly, that artist practice flourishes in St Helens so artists are able to develop work, but also able to live and work there as artists.

“We take a committed holistic approach, to tilling the soil, raising ambition and putting supports in place and creating these other bombastic moments that mean that when those things fuse together over time that that results in something feeling different.” Heart of Glass

OUTCOMES

According to Heart of Glass, the main outcomes that have been observed so far can be summed up as a steady rise in first time arts engagement, development of artist practice, exploration of new ideas, and encountering different sets of people, circumstances and situations. There is a growing acknowledgement amongst local people that St Helens is a place where exciting things can happen and, the general feedback on the programme has been along the lines of “I can’t believe that has happened here.” Encouragingly, there are already signs that Heart of Glass is helping to bring confidence in the arts sector, as artists and community groups are already starting to apply for different types of funding and are becoming more independent and feeling more optimistic going forwards.

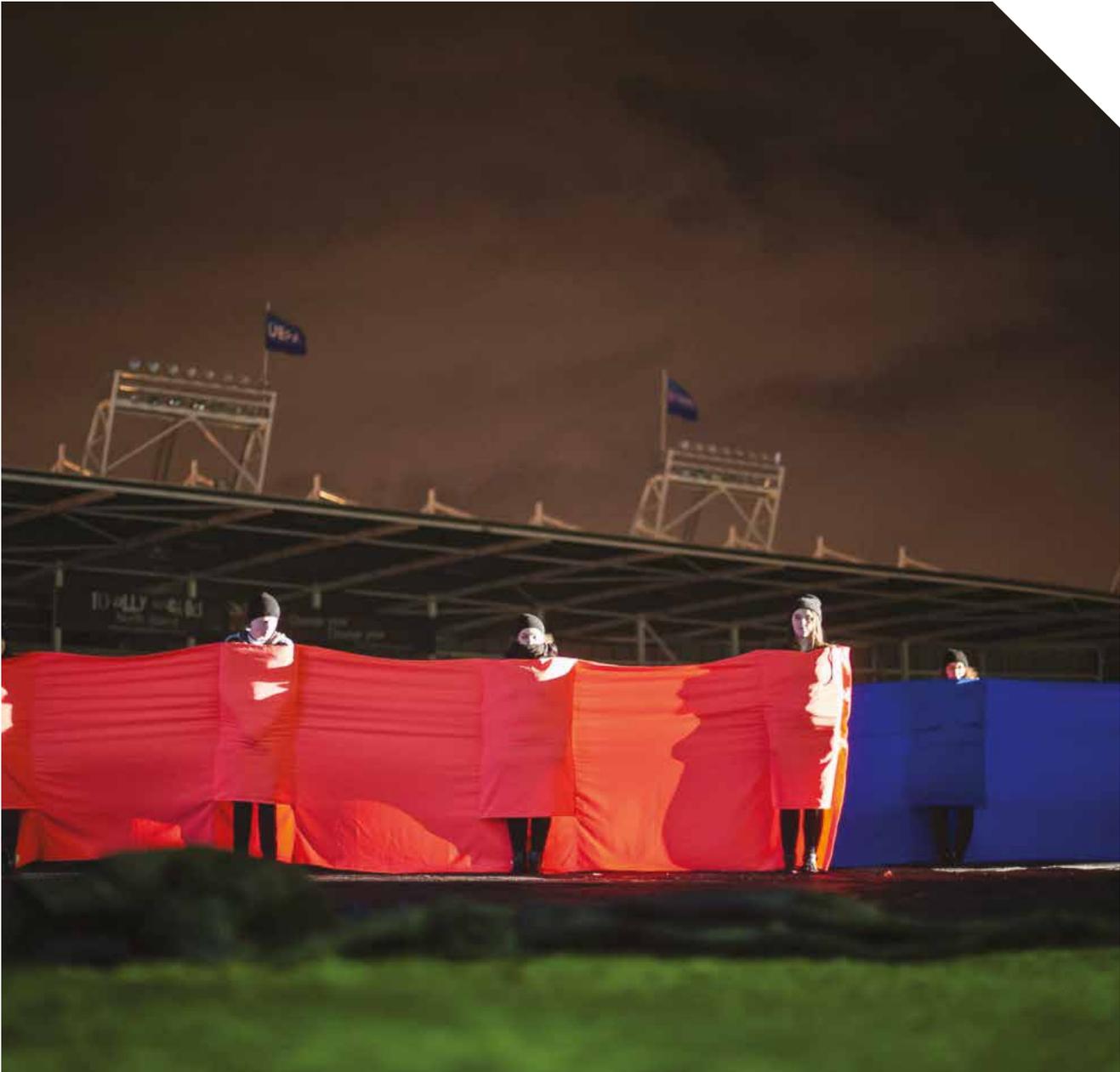
“It feels different. It feels like there is an energy and things are starting to interconnect. Our commitment to this kind of holistic approach is starting to pay dividends now and starting to knit together.” Heart of Glass

Heart of Glass anticipated that a significant amount of community development was required to establish audiences from scratch and to work with different groups. However, the local demand for the arts has exceeded expectations, as all of the Heart of Glass activities so far, even those considered to be more radical or artistically challenging, have been well attended or sold out.

“Local attitudes towards the arts have been very positive and there’s a real appetite for the arts.” Heart of Glass

On an individual level, Heart of Glass inspired a teacher at St Helens College, who was a former performance artist to produce his own work again after 17 years. He was one of the successful applicants to receive a prototype project commission from Heart of Glass. He created a performance installation called ‘*A Guinea A Box*’ for the Heritage Weekend that brought the Beecham’s building back to life, through the stories and memories of those who once worked there.

“For me personally it’s been massively important, it’s totally turned around my own opinions of myself as an artist and it’s made me rethink my work. I think I convinced myself after 15 years I was happy enough helping my students to make work. The more that I’m engaged with it now, the more I’m thinking ‘why am I not doing it myself?’ It’s opened me up again to wanting to create work and it’s given me the confidence to do that.” Teacher, St Helens College



Heart of Glass: *Silent Night / 'And, on that Note'*. Photo: Stephen King

WHAT WORKED WELL?

- Strong principles and local roots** – Heart of Glass is passionate about working with communities on projects where people are at its core. CCP is regarded as an opportunity to fundamentally change the way that people of St Helens think about and consider the role of arts in society.

“There was a shared feeling and understanding that arts had a vital role to play in civil society, and if this is an opportunity that has come up to have a more strategic or embedded strategy around the arts interface with St Helens and its community, then we should go for it.” Heart of Glass

- Strength of the partnership** – Collaboration is central to everything that Heart of Glass does. The programme brings together a diverse steering group of enthusiastic arts and non-arts partners from a wide range of sectors that are all committed to the cause and contribute a wealth of knowledge and experience of arts and community engagement.

“Our partners have gone along on the journey with us.

We have been given the keys to buildings and given the support.

People have allowed us to have a good go at this and try to do something

significant, ambitious and meaningful. We would have not have been able

to do that without the help of the partners involved.” Heart of Glass

- **Initiated by a strong lead partner** – The Saints Community Development Foundation has a strong community outreach emphasis which has enabled it to reach out and engage with a wide and varied audience, including its links with 13 Community Rugby League clubs that are embedded in the community of St Helens. It also has a significant role in capacity building and given the community the means to support and sustain itself.

“We are trying to train the people out there to do it themselves and show them where the funding is. As the Arts Council have said this is the lowest area for up take of small grants.

So we had workshops to tell the people. We have two / three youngsters

getting their bids together now. That’s what I think this programme should be

about, growth and sustainability.” Saints Community Development Foundation

- **Confidence to be bold and push the boundaries** – Heart of Glass is not afraid to try lots of different things; it’s constantly asking different types of questions and provoking different types of debate. This includes programmes of work that give visibility to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community, a project that talks about being a woman in an explicitly patriarchal structure or society, or programmes of work which talk about child poverty.

“What CPP has allowed us to do is to be brave and to take risks.

Real art makes us re-question the world in which we inhabit, it’s not something which is open for the masses, and it’s got something that makes you feel different.

We want to create experiences that stay with you.” Heart of Glass

- **Embedded in the wider sphere of arts** – Another unique strength of Heart of Glass are its networks with partners at different levels - locally, regionally and nationally. For example, Heart of Glass has worked with other CPPs, national arts agencies in London, festivals based in Birmingham, the Philharmonic Orchestra, Tate Liverpool, a local taxi firm, a local café and with local market traders.

“We are as comfortable being with the chief executives and MPs at strategic meetings

thinking about the future of arts and cultural provision in the country or in the town,

as we are in a community centre having a cup of tea. We think that we need to be

doing these things in parallel in order for it to be a success.” Heart of Glass

LESSONS LEARNT

- › **Limited time and resources** - Although there is a lot of excitement and enthusiasm about Heart of Glass, meeting the demand and capacity is a challenge given the limited time and resources of the CPP programme. Heart of Glass is managing to overcome this challenge by holding on to their strategic focus and being selective about which opportunities to go for.

“With any of these projects which happen, there is a tidal wave of things that come towards you, that people just need this or ‘if I had this amount of money I could do this’, but actually how do we hold on to the strategy focus? It’s thinking about the next steps and pathways which keep me up at night. We are building a plane and flying it at the same time. Sometimes you have to use your gut instincts.” Heart of Glass

- › **Critical discourse** - Part of the problem for St Helens and other CPP areas is that they are disconnected from the critical debates about art and the role of art in today’s society. There’s a need to make sure that what CPP areas are doing is connected beyond the geographic boundaries that CPP areas are working in. That’s why Heart of Glass regularly engages in open debate and recently organised the *With for About: Conversations About Collaboration* symposium which included opportunities for artists, producers and curators to network, as well as critical conversations being led by leading practitioners in the field.

“It’s important that we can actually benchmark our work around critical discourse within the broader field of arts and culture, with national and international trends so that they are not operating within a snow globe, but that they are actually connected and vital within a bigger ecology.” Heart of Glass

- › **Communication** - Heart of Glass believes that effective communication and having an open dialogue approach are very important to the success of its programme, but acknowledges that there is always room for improvement.

“You can never communicate enough, we communicate regularly through the steering group meetings, but also on a one to one basis and on the various partnership projects we are working on. Balancing delivery with visioning and communication is always a challenge. We have done well, but we can always do better.” Heart of Glass

ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE

For Heart of Glass, artistic excellence is in some ways a “buzzword”, which if said enough times loses meaning. Artistic excellence is difficult to define, but it should mean different things at different times to different people. It works best as a fluid concept, as excellence can come in many different forms and guises, and hold different meanings and value.

“If we try to homogenise that or try to create a five-step guide to quality what would that look like? What it would end up doing is the complete opposite of that. Quality shouldn’t be an assembly line or a standardised rubber stamp.” Heart of Glass

For Heart of Glass, great art is work that “inspires, challenges and makes you reconsider, update your thinking, fall in love with a particular situation, theme or topic, or gives you a renewed energy about something”. Moreover, quality of process or engagement and quality of work should not be thought of as exclusive things, which is why Heart of Glass ensures that it has a knowledgeable staff team with a vast amount of arts experience, but also has really strong and embedded relationships with communities and partners who good at making connections and having those links. It’s as much about getting the right artist and the right partner, as is about asking the right questions and setting the right briefs. Artistic quality is something which should also transcend all boundaries of time and space.

“There is no such thing as a tiered understanding of the quality that it’s ok or good enough for St Helens, but is not good enough for London, Liverpool or New York. What we have to do is have a level of ambition which means that this is quality work for a range of audiences that just happens to be happening in St Helens and that we are not apologetic or dumbing down things. That’s something I feel very passionate about.” Heart of Glass

SILENT NIGHT / ‘AND, ON THAT NOTE’

Heart of Glass in collaboration with Saints Community Development Foundation and St Helens Music Service hosted an event at Langtree Park Stadium to mark the anniversary of the World War I Christmas Truce of 1914. The steering group were keen to create an arts intervention at the rugby stadium and came up with the idea for the event which would combine an experimental mix of music, live visual arts and sculptural interventions. There was a choir of 600 people from church, community and school choirs across St Helens, a music conductor, and youth brass band, as well as locally based artists, 40 volunteers and students from local colleges performing to an audience of approximately 2,000 people. *Silent Night / ‘And, on that Note’* created highly experimental moments of transition, states of uncertainty, in-between private thought and public behaviour, which required its audience to find their own meaning and interpretation of what it represented.

HAUNTED FURNACE

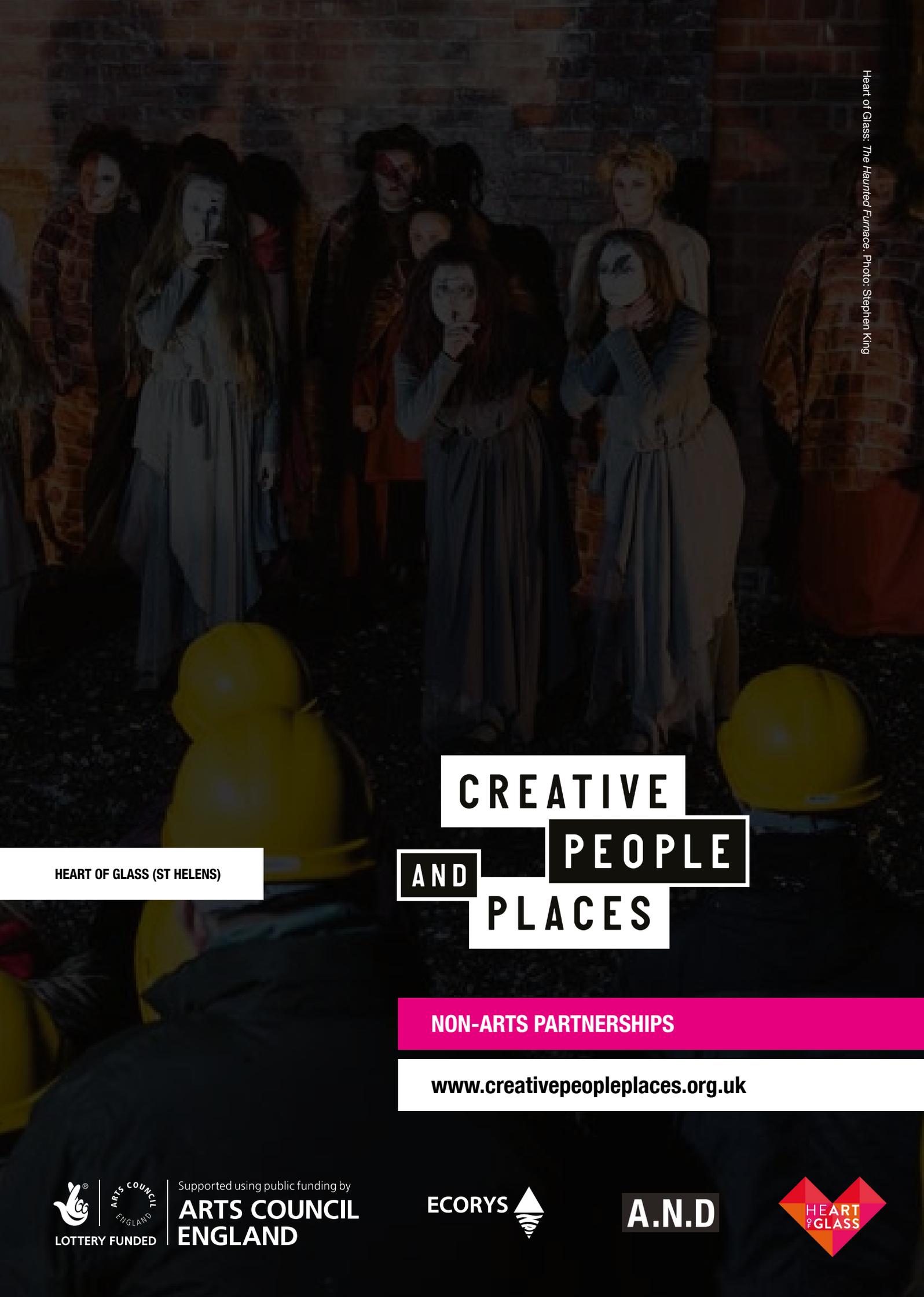
Part of the Heart of Glass *Take Over Fest*, the *Haunted Furnace* was a politically powerful project set in a basin of a disused glass furnace. It showcased the work of a renowned cabaret and theatre performer, who worked with a local artist and 30 young female performers from St Helens to create an interactive feminist horror show, which was rooted in the stories of women in St Helens. Heart of Glass is not afraid to experiment with non-arts venues or have material that draws on the politics of the past or present. Most of the young female performers are aged 13 to 25, some are studying at college and some are young carers. It was a great opportunity for them to experience first hand what it is like to be involved in a professional arts project, and to consider what opportunities and careers in arts are available to them. After the success of the project, the performers have now formed their own theatre company and Heart of Glass is supporting them on their journey to the big stage.

“What is unique about our programme is opening up different structures e.g. an old chimney or a disused warehouse, a taxi cab, a disused shop, or an old college bar which use to be a old pharmaceutical factory, and placing art and artists in direct conversation with those situations, and it’s something which feels uniquely St Helens, but works within a national and international stage, in terms of quality and ambition.” Heart of Glass

SUSTAINABILITY

The ultimate goal for Heart of Glass is to create vibrant and sustainable arts ecology in St Helens by the end of the CPP programme. Heart of Glass has taken steps to build sustainability into their programme and it has looked at different models to ensure that a robust ten year plan is in place for St Helens. Heart of Glass acknowledges that it is operating in a challenging and hyper-changing landscape, as with the exception of St Helens Cultural Hubs programme for arts in libraries there are no other strategic long-term public funds. Nevertheless, Heart of Glass has a risk register, a wide funding base, a wide portfolio of partners, and particular expertise in certain fields, which will help Heart of Glass to carve out a unique selling point for the programme, so that it will be able to support the arts development in St Helens into the long term. Already there are some activities that had CPP funding in year one, which Heart of Glass has now secured seed funding from elsewhere for year two.

“Heart of Glass exists as a ten year plan with or without CPP. We would love it to be with CPP, but we also can’t approach it as anything but a long term commitment as three years is nothing. Three years is creating a sense of excitement and then turning the music off. Certain things and certain projects will find life in other guises, but not everything will and that will take time. It’s very tough out there funding wise in terms of the community development sector. We are in amidst one of the biggest civil society crises certainly in my lifetime and other people would agree.” Heart of Glass



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