

Performing Places Bexley

2017-2020

Evaluation

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Report compiled by Sophie Leedham, Bexley Council, 2019-2020



Performing Places Bexley

This report details the findings of the Performing Places Bexley project evaluation and includes the project theory of change, and description, key findings to date and learnings. Performing Places Bexley was a two-year project designed and delivered by Professor Sally Mackey (The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London) with her creative team and partnered with London Borough of Bexley.

“It was a real atmospheric change. As someone who has lived here all my life, it was the closest thing to bringing the Southbank to Bexley”.

- Library Service, London Borough of Bexley

“How you guys were making old generations speak to young generations. I would like to see more of that, so they are not being rude to us and we are not being rude to them. The activities I saw you running were a spinning wheel. I saw people drawing. I saw people from schools asking older people to sit with them, like a party”.

- Bexley student at a post street week workshop in Year 1

“People from other schools scare me because I don’t know them. I didn’t feel as scared. Because everyone was having fun, no-one could get into beef”.

- Bexley students at a post street week workshop in Year 1



Figure 1 Crowds gather around the Bexleyheath Clocktower on the last day of Street Week

Project theory of change

The overall aim of the project was to test what impact an interruption to place can have on people's perception of the place and towards people from diverse groups who occupy the place. It also sought to explore the role of culture as a vehicle by which the Council can enact its community leadership role and also provide a civic platform that, amongst other tools, brings people from different backgrounds together.

Project activities

The two year project used interactive performance to engage with new and settled communities in a cultural programme of workshops and events which interrupted the physical place through 're-experiences', 'subversions', 'scapes', 'markings' and 'narratives'.

Project activities included:

1. Creating an imaginative, engaging narrative as a framework for the two-year project to embrace schools, communities and those in the place of Bexleyheath using the methods associated with a Performing Place model created by Professor Sally Mackey over several years.
2. Engaging professional facilitators and performers to work in schools and communities and in the streets, to 'produce' that narrative and its emphasis on re-viewing place through design and realisation.
3. Creating accessible online platforms for this narrative for participants (website, social media, etc.).
4. Reaching out and engaging school staff (through the Performing Places creative team, Little Fish reputation and Council staff) for workshops and assemblies.
5. Running workshops and assemblies in primary and secondary schools, focused on the ideas of valuing place.

The Theory of change (Figure 1) outlines how activities were expected to lead to outcomes. For example, by interacting together during street performance weeks, new and settled communities' attitudes towards each other start to change and people start to view the space more positively.

Underlying assumptions

The key assumptions of the project included:

- (i) The following understanding of 'new' and 'settled' communities as
 - o 'New'- school children, young, majority ethnically diverse, families.
 - o 'Settled' - older, majority white British, adults.
- (ii) People's perception of place can shift through this Performing Places model.
- (iii) Partnerships will result in long lasting relationships and new opportunities.
- (iv) Schools will be willing to participate and positively disposed towards the offer.
- (v) Ability to use an existing arts infrastructure in Bexley.

Theory of change

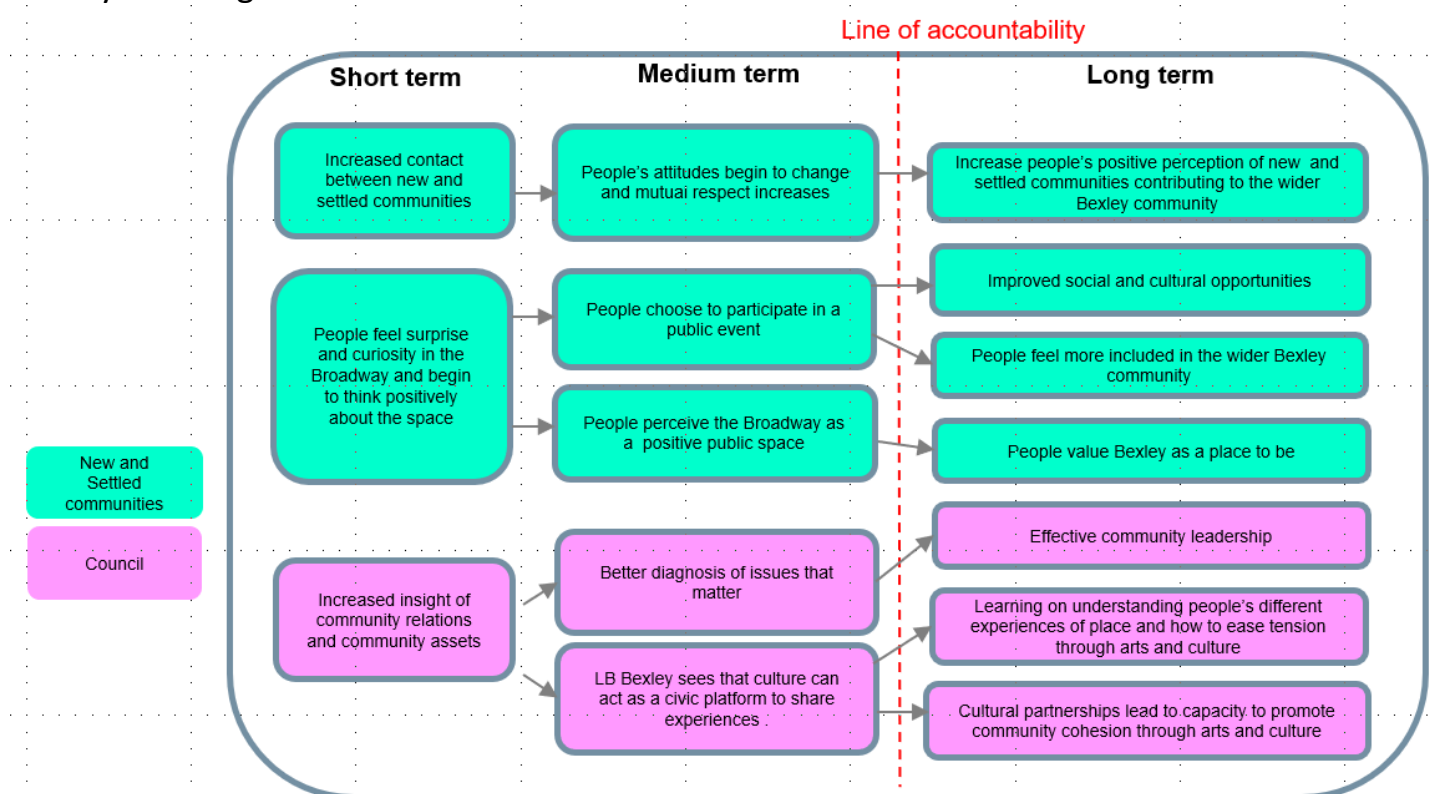


Figure 2: Performing Places Theory of Change

Outputs

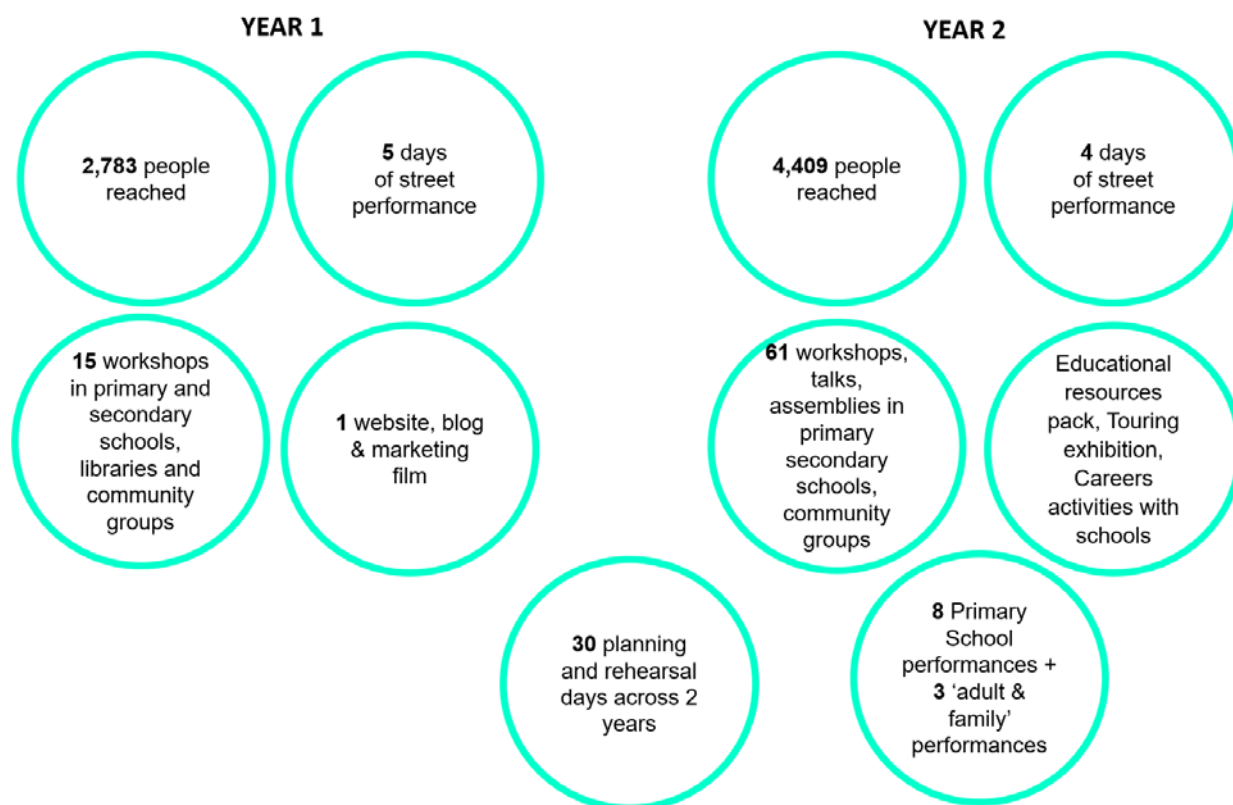


Figure 3: Performing Places Bexley outputs

Outcomes

- Increased contact between new and settled communities

Contact between new and settled communities was actively brokered by Performing Places Bexley facilitators during Street Week in Year 1 and 2 and 'prepped' during the community and schools workshops. Data collected from on the street and post workshop surveys found 90%¹ of those surveyed at the street week activities in Year 1 agreeing with the statement *"It brought different types of people together"*. People were asked on Friday and Saturday of the Street Week in Year 2² if they *"feel more open towards people who are different to me"*. More than half (56%) of those surveyed on the Friday agreed with this, and more than a third (38%) of those surveyed on Saturday agreed.

There were positive indicators from qualitative feedback at both the street weeks and school workshops that this increased contact between different communities brokered a generally good feeling.

"I like how this got a lot of people together, created a nice atmosphere"

- Member of public at Street Week in Year 1



Figure 4: Street Week activity of giving small gifts to strangers

In focus: Workshops

Workshops were held in primary and secondary schools, libraries and community groups. In Year 2, workshops in 4 secondary schools reached 1062 pupils both before and after street week in Year 2. The close proximity with the young people and the relationship that was built up during the workshop enabled easy capture of detailed feedback

¹ Sample unspecified

² Sample of 129 people at the street week performances on Friday and Saturday of Year 2

about the workshops, street week performance and its apparent impact on the students' perceptions of their own behaviour and of the older generation towards them.

- **Pre-street week workshops** included discussing anti-social activities that take place in the Broadway. Students brainstormed the 'good' and 'bad behaviour' on the Broadway. Through drama, the groups created Instagram images (freeze frames) and short scenarios, for example, that represented some of the issues in the brainstorm. They presented these to the rest of the group. This involved tackling anti-social behaviour, problems on buses, helping less able members of the community. They made a symbolic place capsule and finished the session with a feedback circle where they all said something they could personally improve and try out when in public:

*'I will **think about my behaviour** in the Broadway more from now on'*

*'I feel like I will **be respectful to older people**'*

*'It is **important to not be intimidating** to others and hang around in big groups'*

*'People need to **stop messing about** on buses, it gets us a bad name.'*

'You can interact with different people on the Broadway'

- **Post-street week workshops** collected testimonies of young people's experiences of street week. They express the change in atmosphere and curiosity at the interruption of the place. They also reflect on the new kinds of positive interactions they had with older people and with students from other schools, which they say is out of the norm:

*"I was coming out of Greggs and I see these people in a yellow uniform and they have brooms or something. I just see them banging the floor and blocking people's way and I see people step over their brooms and stuff and me and my friend see the wheel that we saw last time, so we thought, 'Oh that looks interesting', so we went over to them. [...] We were eating our donut and we met a guy called Karim who roped us into making these little rose bunches and writing an inspirational message and then giving it to a stranger. We got rejected like 50 times before we actually gave it away. One person said thanks and bye and walked away, then the lady I gave mine to was really excited. **The atmosphere was different**, I felt bad that I couldn't stay. The people with black caps were trying to grab my attention but I couldn't stay. **I saw people from different schools who normally make me nervous** because I don't like talking to anyone my age, **but they all seemed very involved. It seemed like a festival and everyone gets very involved and you not really strangers anymore.** You're just people co-existing'.*

*"We stuck some eyes on a bench and wrote a message, two people came up to us and said you can write a happy positive message on the bench, so we wrote 'Sit here if you are happy' and they got some people to sit on the bench. It was nice. **It made the atmosphere different** because it spread positivity, optimism and cheered people up a lot. It made us laugh".*

While it is difficult to evidence any *lasting* impact that the workshops and street week had on pupils' perceptions, some survey respondents from workshops in Year 2, suggest that their experience did influence perceptions, even from this relatively brief project, illustrated in the table below.

School pupils' attitudes to the Performing Places Bexley workshops in Year 2			
Q: Do you agree with the following statements about what the workshop made you think and feel	Yes	No	Don't know
Positive about living and going to school in Bexley	11	4	17
There are activities and things to do for young people locally	17	4	11
It made me feel closer to people different to me	10	12	10
Feel open talking to people who are different to me	12	10	10
Helped me understand people who are different to me	10	9	13
It made me think about Bexley in a new way	13	12	7
Base: 32 respondents to a survey following a secondary school workshop in Year 2			

"It affirmed what I believe that change only happens over time - whilst there were some lovely moments there were also some very difficult situations with adults" - Student volunteer from Year 1

While there is emerging evidence from Performing Places Bexley that the approach can – and did – positively influence the *short-term* outcomes, influencing the *medium* and *longer-term* outcomes was perhaps out of the scope of what could be achieved through a two year project alone.

- People feel surprise and curiosity in the Broadway and begin to think positively about the space

On street survey respondents reported the Broadway's '*Different atmosphere*' in Year 2 (88% on the Friday and 92% on the Saturday) and said that the word that best reflected the experience was '*Curious*' (42% on the Friday and 45% on the Saturday of year 2)³.

³ See annex for survey full findings in Year 2



Figure 5 Two Par Bexians and a 'Vist' at a bus stop in Bexleyheath

64% of school pupils surveyed (18/28) in a Year 1 workshop said they enjoyed feeling ‘*More involved in Bexleyheath Broadway*’ after they had learned about street week and how they could get involved and 75% of school pupils surveyed in Year 1 workshops agreed that the workshop would, “*help people feel good about living, working and going to school in Bexleyheath*”.

84% of people surveyed at the street week in Year 1 said- *It made me feel more positive about Bexleyheath Broadway* and 68% of felt- *It made me see Bexleyheath Broadway in a new way*”.

- **People perceive the Broadway as a positive public space**

As we have seen, ‘interrupting’ the space of the Bexleyheath Broadway in Years 1 and 2 evidently helped people to perceive the Broadway as a positive public space throughout the Street Weeks themselves.

“It was definitely positive. I used to pass by the Broadway to go to school. My interpretation of the Broadway growing up was it was quite an aggressive place where people hang about that you didn’t want to see, so it definitely gave me a more positive view of the Broadway, more family orientated” – Street week adult participant Year 1

“It made it look like a safer place [because] there was more little kids there” – Street week teenage participant Year 1

it. The first lady I gave it to ran off, the second lady was really kind and sweet and really appreciative of it and it made me happy.”

- Post street week school workshop

- People choose to participate in a public event

People stopped to observe as well as participate further, in the street week activities. In Year 2, an average of 27% of people said that they took part in an arts activity, while 53% said that they observed an arts activity.

The project team reported a higher than anticipated proportion of the public who were willing to get involved. Positive experiences there led to individuals exploring more of the Broadway area with the Broadway reporting a marked increase in footfall. The final Saturday of the Street Week, July 6th, 2019 saw footfall on the Broadway up by 0.9%, when the week prior to PPB, footfall had been down by 4%. Similarly, in Year 1 businesses in the Broadway saw a 2% increase in footfall during performance week and local businesses say it gave Bexleyheath Broadway ‘*a greater sense of community.*’



Figure 7 Local people were invited to look again at their shared space

*“[my daughter was] obviously so proud of what she made, especially when she had to make a wish and little letter in a glitter jar and **handed it to an old lady that just passed by (the first one refused it).** She got attention and someone opening their heart to what she had made.” [‘I’, mother of young girl] – Street week participant in Year 1*

- Increased insight of community relations and community assets

Performing Places Bexley indicated how the very act of bringing different communities together could and did bring existing tensions to the surface. These did come out during the pre-project street consultations and from pupil perceptions during the school workshops.

An 80-year-old man said in Year 1 *“There is racism everywhere. There’s no love here”*

The Performing Places team carried out some pre-project street consultations in Year 1 and encountered a level of integrational tension:

“I don’t have much feeling about the Broadway apart from when those horrible kids are out there in the afternoon. I hate them, they are horrible, they are like animals. They are gobby, pushy, they are rude on the bus, loud. They try and intimidate you when you try and go anywhere. There is just too many of them. Horrible, horrible.” - Pre-project consultation person in street

Young people reported during the school workshops some level of frustration at how they are perceived by older people in the place.

*“As soon as a group of four school children come together and it looks like they are about to fight, the whole of Bexleyheath comes running to see what is about to happen. Us school children need to stop making problems bigger than they are. I live really far away, so **the Broadway is just a place I go to go home. Sometimes I feel like I don't want to stick around there or be a part of that community** because it’s just a place to get to other places. It would be nice if it was less stressful though. It’s a bit hectic, you can’t really spend time there. If we get negative energy from older people and police officers, school children respond with negative energy”. – Year 2 schools workshop*

I was going to buy something in M&S and the policeman told security to get the manager – I was told to leave, I hadn’t done anything – my mum had given me money to buy new school trousers – I had the money in my hand” – Young Person surveyed in Year 1.

We have seen on p5 some evidence of how bringing old and young together did start to foster more positive feelings between the generations and people from different backgrounds.

“[I like] The way they’re acting with the kids and drawing them in to have a go” – Street week participant in Year 1

However long-term change takes time. As one street week participant observed in Year 1: *“How is one random act of kindness going to change years of dealing with racism in this area?”*

- **LB Bexley sees that culture can act as a civic platform to share experiences**

The insights workshop with the project team explored the impact of the project on the local authority, much of which is reflected in the Lessons Learnt section later. The group concluded that Performing Places Bexley has demonstrated how culture can be a vehicle for achieving other things whether it be improving cohesion, increasing footfall in a high street or placemaking. The value of the approach, much of which is difficult to quantify or evidence, was witnessed anecdotally by senior decision makers. For example, the London Borough of Bexley’s Chief Executive witnessed an incidence of a shared experience between an older man and young woman from different ethnic groups – this has made a lasting impression.

Unintended outcomes

The project team reflected on a number of unanticipated outcomes and added value that emerged from the Performing Places Bexley 'journey'.

- **Different forms of marginalisation addressed**

While Performing Places Bexley was focused on tackling racial and intergenerational tensions, the project also uncovered other accessibility issues for those with hidden and visible disabilities and other protected characteristics. For example, Bexley Mencap's service users originally expressed anxiety about disability discrimination occurring on the Broadway and then got really involved in the activities happening there because of their participation in the project's workshops.

- **Created new working relationships**

Performing Places Bexley brought together partners who had not worked together before. As we will see in the Lessons Learnt section, this was not without its challenges and exposed a lack of infrastructure in the council to work on arts projects. Through focused attention during and after Year 1, new working relationships forged in the project have continued with for example, Bexley secondary school contacts collaborating with the Local Authority and BAME Network on Bexley's Black History Month celebration and Little Fish Theatre Company collaborating with Bexley secondary schools and the Local Authority on Bexley's Hate Crime Awareness Week.

"There was a marked difference in years 1 and 2 between the partners as there was more shared understanding."

- Arts Institution

"Through the highs and the lows we were in it together".

- Council officer

- **Informed future plans**

Performing Places Bexley required the council part of the project team to learn, on the job, how to 'cut through red tape' for outdoor events and deliver an arts intervention on the Bexleyheath Broadway. Learning from Performing Places Bexley has informed

the planning of Bexley's September Sounds music festival, and brokered more effective partnership working between the Libraries Service and Town Centre's Team. Insights from the participants and learning from how the Broadway works as a performance space through the work of the Performing Places Bexley creative team has directly informed Bexley's bid to the Good Growth Fund bid to the Mayor of London.

"We learned how to successfully navigate things with teams and partners"

- Council officer

- **Unlocked wider value**

Working with a Higher Education body (The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama - CSSD) who employed professional arts practitioners (including from arts organisations who have worked in Bexley) unlocked value beyond the initial scope of the project. For example, Professor Sally Mackey offered a large-scale first year undergraduate production from CSSD based on the Performing Places Bexley narrative and treated local school children to a high quality public performance (8 performances). The project team remarked that for many of the young people, it would have been their first time in the audience of a high quality piece of theatre.

Lessons learnt

The insights workshop with the project delivery team identified a number of factors which enabled and hindered the achievement of the project objectives.

Project design and delivery

- **Involve stakeholders earlier:** A key assumption at the beginning of the project was that schools will be willing to participate and positively disposed towards the offer – this was not always the case and the project team underestimated the time it would take to engage schools in the programme. A longer development time at the bid writing phase with engagement from key community stakeholders would have eased contact with secondary schools and offered more lead-in time to secure commitment from a few additional community groups.
- **Understand human resource required:** The council-based project team underestimated the human resource required to deliver a project to such a scale. Much of this was due to the absence of pre-existing cultural infrastructure to build upon and enable the project. Ability to use an existing arts infrastructure in Bexley was another underlying assumption made by the project team at the beginning of the project. There was agreement across the delivery partners at the insights session the Performing Places Bexley took up considerably more officer time than anticipated. The Performing Places Bexley creative team themselves contributed considerably more time (beyond that budgeted) also to fill this gap. For example, **Appointment of production manager** by RCSSD was essential to support the project lead, Mackey, for ensuring high quality delivery and partnership working between the delivery teams.
- **Designation of a project lead within the Council** was critical to assist in cutting through red tape and to create greater internal project ownership and leadership across all Council levels and departments.
- **The sequencing around the bid and project development could have been improved;** the theory of change and engagement of partners should have been done earlier at the bid development stage. This would, potentially, have produced clearer objectives within the bid. Assigning joint project leaders and holding regular face-to-face meetings at the bid stage of the project would have made achieving those objectives easier.
- **Focus groups before and after the Street Weeks** with the same group of shop keepers, residents and school children would have been helpful to measure change in their attitudes. Evaluators were potentially appointed too late in the project to enable this and it would have been desirable to have had evaluators in place before the project began.

Partnerships, collaboration and communication

- **Embracing and learning from the inherent ‘culture clash’:** A local authority officer who was part of the project team said that a key learning for them was that *“You have to be committed to creating the environment to allow the arts to do the arts as well as having the human resource to enable this – it won’t just happen”*.
- **Advisory board kept the project team on track**
- Could have worked better with Cabinet members; the project was relevant to multiple members’ focuses so there was not a clear political leader.

Advice to other LAs and Service Providers:

- **Work with Higher Education providers whenever possible.** Accessing researched insights from academics, in this instance on the arts and community engagement, offers expertise at a high level. Where interests conflate as they did in this project, research and local authority agendas are mutually beneficial. For example, CSSD graduates and current students were at the heart of this project and had been trained in such

work and provided a remarkable resource. Academics communicate and the involvement of Rose Bruford and Bird came about because of the lead from CSSD pursuing colleagues in these institutions.

- Work with local community organisations to tap into local knowledge and insight
- Maintain relationships developed for future activities
- Ensure that you create the right environment for cultural projects to flourish, provide the resource needed and allow space for creativity to thrive
- Don't allow collaborative working to overrun creative expertise
- Commit to enough time to allow trust between partners and the project concept to evolve.
- Recognise that community engagement is a long-term commitment
- Reframing perceptions of Bexley and Bexleyheath Broadway, the place as well as the people within it, is a big ambition - but very positive shifts over what is possible are emerging as a result of Performing Places Bexley.

Legacy

- Key contacts made within the schools for future engagement e.g. Black History Month
- The ongoing liaison with Professor Sally Mackey and Central including: education packs, postcards, exhibition and films produced will continue the work done beyond the project's completion and support future joint connections.
- The involvement of Performing Places Bexley practitioners who also worked at Little Fish Theatre Company has meant that they have had the opportunity to make connections within the borough and will be doing more work around Bexley going forward. Heritage Lottery Funding is now accessible to Little Fish because of partnerships built and the impact data available from participating in the project.
- Project partners have been invited to join the borough's Cultural Board.
- The project has been nominated for an arts award and is being put forward for a research impact award.
- September Sounds festival.
- Involvement from Rose Bruford College in the literary festival.
- Town centres are building on connections created for other bids.

Methodology

The insights for this report were captured through:

- Quantitative data gathered via on-street surveys on five of the street weeks days across Years 1 and 2, supplemented by vox pops
- Qualitative interviews with street week participants
- Pre-project research on the Broadway by the PPB creative team
- Surveys, questionnaires and other qualitative feedback from schools and community workshops
- Interviews with stakeholders: local business on PPB street week days and with Bexley Business Improvement District officers
- Insights workshop with the project team to reflect on lessons learned and legacy

Table 1: Survey respondents during Street Week Year 2

Performance Days Brief Public Survey: Comparison of Friday & Saturday		
	Friday	Saturday
	50 respondents	79 respondents
Perception of the Broadway during events and activities	Different atmosphere: 44 (88%)	Different atmosphere x 73 (92%)
Activities undertaken on the day	Took part in an arts activity here <i>today</i> : 16 (20%) Observed an arts activity or performance here <i>today</i> : 27 (54%)	Took part in an arts activity here <i>today</i> x 26 (33%) Observed an arts activity or performance here <i>today</i> x 41 (52%)
Attended a Community workshop before that day	Attended Community Workshop: 3 (6%)	Attended Community Workshop x 2 (2. 5%)
Word which best reflects experience	Curious x 21 (42%) Excited x 13 (7%) Surprised x 10 (5%)	Curious x 36 (45%) Excited x 17 (13%) Surprised x 18 (14%)
Impact on view of Bexleyheath Broadway	More <i>positive</i> about Bexleyheath Broadway x 30 (60%)	More <i>positive</i> about Bexleyheath Broadway x 62 (78%)
Impact on causing contact with someone different	Age x 24 (48%) Had no interaction with anyone x 22 (44%) Ethnicity x 10 (20%)	Age x 35 (44%) Ethnicity 22 (28%) Had no interaction with anyone x 22 (28%)
Impact of events on openness to people who are different to self	More open towards people who are different to you x 28 (56%) No different, feel the same as before x 21 (42%)	No different, feel the same as before x 44 (56%) More open towards people who are different to you x 30 (38%)
Would like to see more of the same kind of arts events happening in the Broadway	- Yes x 48 (96%)	- Yes x 75 (95%)

Table 2: Mother and baby workshop in Year 2

Mother & Baby Workshop in Year 2			
Do you agree with the following statements about what the workshop made you think and feel			
	Yes	No	Not sure
It enhances the sense of community in this area	92%		8%

It is welcoming for the whole community	96%		4%
It encourages participation in community life and events	80%		20%
It is good for Bexley's image	96%		4%
It is great that this event is local	92%		8%
It makes me feel more part of the community	68%	4%	28%
It has given me the chance to socialise with friends and family	73%		27%
It made me feel closer to people who are different to me	64%	12%	24%
It makes me want to get involved in other events like this	84%	4%	12%
Base 26 survey respondents following community workshop			