

century. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Alistair Darling, policy makers and successive leaders of the council have recently been keen to visit our new building and identify with its success, but there is still no real promise of financial support in the medium term, which is essential if we are to continue beyond 2009/10.

KWMC’s original emphasis on community involvement is still central to the organisation. At our core are people, their experiences and engagement. This drives everything that we do, but what has changed is that we are now also more outward looking. We have a very clear local focus but we also look out to the region, nationally and internationally because we need to collaborate and learn from others. It’s about developing practice rather than expanding to work with more and more people – which we couldn’t do without limitless resources and capacity.

Our aim has always been to create a balance around authorship and ownership and what we do is create a space for collaboration, between artists and the community. There are arts organisations who work in regeneration doing one off community arts projects, but it is often not very interesting or productive to parachute into a community, produce a piece of work – that could involve one other person for a short time, and call it a community project or art. It’s only partial development for the artist, and is not really about the development of ideas. More importantly we want to build trust, continuity and longer term relationships that push ideas further and take creative risks. That’s what makes it interesting and inspiring for me.

Other challenges have been managing expectations and keeping people on board. You know what you could be doing to support people or develop projects but you can’t do everything all of the time. We try to be realistic about what is achievable and not ‘over promise’ either to individuals or to funders, but try to get them to see the potential. We have recently set-up a new project exploring ideas around environmental change, but we are clearly not able to make Knowle West a carbon neutral estate as a result of one project.

Another interesting transition has been developing a mind-set within the staff team that moves away from grant dependency to income generation and business planning whilst at the same time remaining true to the aims and objectives of the organisation, and simultaneously delivering a creative programme. This requires a hybrid skill-set, maintaining the ‘can-do’ activism alongside entrepreneurial acumen. One is about exploring potential, while the other is about exploiting an opportunity.

Bringing in professional artists and freelancers is one of the most exciting, and sometimes most thought provoking aspects of what we do. Artists may want to challenge communities, regeneration policy and practice but I have seen arts practice that I would describe as exploiting the relationships we have built up with the community and this is ultimately negative for us. We have a responsibility to ensure that people are not unwittingly manipulated but are informed participants in creative practices.

A major part of the organisation’s success is the involvement of residents at all levels. We have strong representation at board level and staff from the community as well. Ideally all of the necessary skills would be found in the community, but they’re often not, so getting that balance right between local expertise and ‘external’ expertise is something that we are constantly addressing.

Increasingly cultural funding is evidence based. I’d like to see organisations like ours feeding back about the work that we have done and then funders extrapolating how this relates to their agendas, rather than it always being the other way around. It would be an interesting scenario to be able to say “the community supports what we are doing and sees value – this is what we have done –put that into your funding streams.”

The new KWMC building will give us more space, higher quality resources for the community to use and potentially a rental income-stream, all of which will enable us to deliver an exciting programme. More importantly it will be a really concrete symbol of what young people and the community have achieved over the last ten years. Young people were involved

in the design and build of the centre over a period of four years and have been central to the success of the building project. It is a visible sign and important symbol that will send out a message of confidence in the future and underline our commitment to being here for the longer term..

Above all we need to continue to be prepared to take risks with creative projects, work with emerging artists and play with unfamiliar ideas. We need to experiment, provide a space for the community and artists to collaborate, and bring people to Knowle West in anticipation of being part of something exciting that challenges the all too prevailing negative attitudes toward the estate and it’s residents. In turn policy makers need to support us without trying to define our practice or create outputs so rigidly that we cease to be able to deliver anything useful or interesting in the future.

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1 The Knowle West Media Centre building is partly constructed from straw bale panels, offering excellent insulation properties and the opportunity to use local materials.

Carolyn Hassan is founder and Director of Knowle West Media Centre, located in South Bristol. Carolyn trained as a photographer and began working in Knowle West in 1995. In the time since then she has set up an award-winning organisation focussed on developing cultural projects for young people, in one of the most deprived areas of Bristol.

In 2008 she oversaw the completion of a new capital project located in Knowle West, that aims to provide media facilities promoting economic, cultural and environmental well-being.

**poster image: Wei Ern Ong**  
**‘Addict for more’ ©2008**

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## CASE STUDY

# Engagement

### *Carolyn Hassan*

I was invited to work in Knowle West in 1995 by Knowle West Health Association, a voluntary group of local people committed to addressing health issues in their community. Health statistics at the time had shown that people were more likely to die younger from diseases such as cancer and heart attacks in Knowle West than in other parts of Bristol.

The five- month residency brief was to work with adults on photography projects that explored the relationship between health and arts. It was a project with a very broad set of objectives, based on the assumption that photography and art could play a positive role in contributing to the well-being of individuals and the community – as opposed to acting as a conduit for spreading government health messages.

I worked with many members of the community some with long-term mental health problems, alcohol and drug dependency issues, and increasingly also with young people. Individuals reported via the evaluation process that they had enjoyed and benefited from their involvement in taking photos, being creative and having the space to express their views through photography and film projects.

There was no plan to create a media centre, but Knowle West Media Centre (KWMC) grew project by project until the present day. It is now an organisation employing sixteen people working from a recently completed straw bale<sup>1</sup>, purpose built community media centre, in the heart of a housing estate in south Bristol. KWMC seeks to achieve social, cultural, and economic regeneration by involving the community in media activity, education and action.

In the week I arrived in Knowle West the local paper referred to the estate as the “Beirut of Bristol”. This reputation as an estate to be both feared and blamed was and remains a part of many people’s experience. Young people and adults have described the discrimination they’ve experienced in a range of situations, from arriving at a new school, seeking employment, to going clubbing. This discrimination limits individuals’ aspirations and has a profound impact on self- image and on defining the community. I believed it was important to look at what was happening on the estate and to explore the ways that engaging individuals in arts projects could challenge this kind of thinking and also encourage reflection about the way in which people in Knowle West related to the city.

For me, there were a few obvious questions to ask: “What are the kinds of issues and ideas, that come from the community that could be developed through media arts practice? What can a small group do to facilitate and create something interesting, and of value to that community?” This is a community where individuals have lots of ideas, concerns, and often conflicting views.

The locality has totally influenced the development of the project – Knowle West has a specific demographic make up and a strong sense of its own identity. It is a very close-knit community, with large families living for generations in the same street, supporting and depending on each other – a defining factor when unemployment hit the estate hard in the 70s and 80s.

There is a high proportion of young people under-achieving educationally, and whilst there is recognition in the community of what the problems are, often supported by central and local government statistics, a recent survey details that most people who live in Knowle West wouldn’t live anywhere else, and this is significant because most people outside of the community don’t understand it.

On reflection this is both a strength and a weakness, it is isolated from the rest of the city being on the edge both geographically, and in the mindset of many it’s an

estate that has entrenched and unresolvable problems. A recurring attitude from policy-makers and some politicians has been that we must give young people the skills to move out and escape the neighbourhood, rather than ensuring that they have access to the educational, employment and cultural opportunities that the rest of the city benefits from, that would enable the community to build its own resources.

In 1996 we set up a SRB<sub>4</sub> (Single Regeneration Budget <sup>4</sup>) film project called *Your Video Letters from Knowle West*. Four part - time media professionals worked with 200 young people looking at what they might like to do with media and what issues were important for them on the estate. This led to an 18 month pilot project for young people to experiment with media, followed by a 5 year SRB<sub>6</sub> project that ended in December 2006.

We were reactive and responsive to ideas coming from individuals in the community, facilitating a range of issue-based projects and increasingly employing media and arts freelancers to work with us. The media project became Knowle West Media Centre in 2002, when it became too big for the organisation hosting it to manage.

The project questioned how you work with young people caught up in a cycle of underachievement at school, boredom, at risk of dependency on heroin, fear of crime and unemployment. This became part of the debate around well-being and its inter-relationship with people’s lifestyles and life experiences. Tangible outcomes relating to some of these agendas included young people re-engaging with learning and education, producing award-winning films, getting onto college courses and successfully finding work.

In one case a young man described by his school as being destined for a young offenders’ institution (like his brother – so there’s a certain inevitability somehow) is now doing a design course, talking of when he is going to be graphic designer and laughing at the advice that he was destined to be a labourer if he was lucky.

The less tangible outcomes, but probably in the longer term those having greater impact, were young people gaining confidence, asserting their opinions and mentoring other young people. There has increasingly been pressure on us to deliver direct outputs such as reducing the numbers of young people carrying knives, offending, and receiving ASBOs (Anti-social Behaviour Orders). Two years ago there was a mixed reaction locally to the posting of some young peoples’ photos announcing they’d been given an ASBO around the estate – some saw it as a challenge to other young people to emulate the young offenders, others saw it as increasing the alienation young people were experiencing leaving those named with nowhere to go. Very few saw it as an effective measure.

Fast forward to now, and the “anti social behaviour” hasn’t disappeared – more extreme naming, shaming and punishment seems to be planned without addressing the causes and circumstances that have created the environment where young people and young men in particular feel they have to carry knives in order to defend themselves or assert that they have some power.

Recently there have been some shocking incidences of two of the estate’s “bad lads” committing suicide. I don’t think it’s realistic to pretend that any project, creative or otherwise, can address these deep rooted problems, but I do believe that the engagement of disaffected young people in creative projects can give them a route back into learning, an opportunity to voice their experiences, and in the longer term contribute to addressing the circumstances that detrimentally affect their lives. The key here is engagement – in my experience coerced participation or punishment rarely achieves any positive outcomes for individuals caught up in a life where identity and choices are determined

by lack of opportunities and other’s perception of you.

Regeneration money was essential to the development of the project. It was not without its problems, but it was funding that allowed a degree of experimentation. Regeneration schemes have clear objectives such as more people skilled, taking up training and gaining employment. However our experience of SRB<sub>4</sub>, SRB<sub>6</sub>, Objective 2 and Neighbourhood Renewal was that there was no fixed idea about how to achieve these, so the schemes allowed us to put forward a proposition and then deliver against it. Through engaging people in media production, we were teaching skills, building confidence, building understanding and a sense of agency.

However because regeneration schemes are output driven there is a danger of being sucked into an instrumentalist approach in the delivery of media projects. Whilst we did achieve targets around skills, more people involved in cultural activity, more jobs created etc. we were more interested in qualitative experiences rather than quantitative outputs, and developing both interesting creative practice and community activism. The short-term nature of regeneration schemes is an issue – the longest was 5 years and this isn’t long to effect the kind of change governments require to prove a scheme has been successful. This short term thinking means that although new ways of working were developed and there were clearly successful projects, local government and central government haven’t moved their thinking along quickly enough to support the development of what has been learnt, what has worked and what has been valued by a community and we have evidence to show this.

There has been a lot of talk about mainstreaming projects like Knowle West Media Centre – but you can’t mainstream something that doesn’t fit within existing services. There’s a danger of having to make it fit into what does exist and therefore make it something that it isn’t. There needs to be a commitment to saying we’re going to fund this because we need a more holistic approach to addressing the cultural, economic and social regeneration of our communities – not ‘this is regeneration’, ‘this is education’, ‘this is arts’. Instead of building on the momentum of a community project, a “new” approach, policy or government comes on the scene and past projects become history. I am advocating that policy makers need to look much further ahead – not just 2 or 3 years but 20 years ahead.

We believe we can work towards a more sustainable social enterprise business model for the organisation that will enable us to retain some independence from the vagaries of funding and government but we need support to get through a period of transition, and to support the activity that is not and will never be a marketable commodity by its very nature. This is an issue for many arts and regeneration projects that have depended on the relatively rich days of regeneration funding. Sitting in between funding streams and resisting the output driven agendas will be the test of the next three years.

We want to remain open and responsive to the community, take risks with our practice and collaborate with artists and media practitioners and see how we can be both independent and sustainable. Whilst we have been successful in bringing together a funding package for the new building, there were several points when key funders such as the South West Regional Development Agency and Bristol City Council said unequivocally that they would not support the capital project. A shift in thinking and support came about as we demonstrated the successes of the project and were able to get funders together to explore the potential that it has. Key to this was the growing understanding of the role that digital technologies and creative thinking were going to have in equipping individuals and communities to meet the challenges of the twenty-first