

How do we measure success?

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Making bait happen takes a lot of precious time and money. This is largely 'public money', mainly from lottery funds distributed by Arts Council England. So it's only right that a major preoccupation of the people and organisations involved is identifying what difference bait makes. This means not just counting the events and how many people come to them. bait is part of a national programme of 'action research' designed to get more people involved in the arts. The various partners want any increase to be a lasting one, so are involving local people. Nobody wants a temporary blip caused by simply having more money to put on more events and projects. bait wants real change. The quality of projects is also crucial. As an action research project bait also wants to look at how it achieves any changes.

To track all this, I've been working with bait under the slightly curious job title of 'Critical Friend'. This doesn't mean I say things like 'Those shoes, with that dress? What are you thinking?' (Unless absolutely necessary, of course.) I am there to ask awkward questions and to suggest new ways of looking at old problems, ideas to adapt from elsewhere and sometimes just to listen. The awkward questions are most often things like 'Why?', 'How will you know that?' and 'Really?'

To make sure bait collects the right evidence to learn what works best to get people involved in the arts, I've worked with them to develop what's called a 'theory of change'. Another way of putting that would be: 'what we think will happen if we get everything right and everything else works out perfectly all the time which it probably won't'.

bait believes working with organisations that local people know and trust to programme high quality arts activity is central to lasting increases in engagement. This will, we think, increase the desire and ability to make the arts happen in South East Northumberland. By making sure everyone knows about what's going on, and understands the benefits to local people, demand for more such projects will grow. Well-being and confidence will grow. People will be more connected to each other socially, and more able to lead or take active roles in their own projects in future.

Setting this out in advance means the bait partnership know what signs to look for, and can spot when things happen in unexpected ways. This may be a new opportunity rather than a problem - people and the arts are both unpredictable. Maybe there are types of projects that build trust and confidence better than others? Maybe group work with people referred by health professionals has greater impact on well-being than other community projects?

bait uses the theory of change to design its work in response to what's actually happening. This helps make sure everyone gets maximum impact from the public money invested. It also gives bait ways to gather evidence to answer the key questions that I know from my work with them preoccupy those involved. How does bait make long-term change in arts participation? How does it make sure that is shaped by the creativity and ambition of local people? Is this work having an impact on people's well-being and confidence? Are more people supporting activity in South East Northumberland with their time, money, commitment? In this way monitoring helps bait constantly refine and improve its work.