

Starting from zero

What we used to do, by and large,
was start from a funding stream.

If that was appropriate for us,
we'd put together an application,
we might get letters of support
from local organisations.

If the application was successful
then they could then accept
whatever we were offering. Or not.

What we do now, is we start with the community.

Saying we think there might be a fruitful collaboration.

If they agree and we work the ideas out together from there,
which might lead to action or to a funding application.

We have absolutely no idea
what our community partners
are going to come up with;
they might be quite conventional,
they might be pretty unconventional.

Another centre full of people,
they wanted to do a knitting project,
but finished up being this amazing cylinder of knitted memories.

And then there was Muslim Voices,
and never in a million years would we, the staff at Lightbox, ourselves,
have come up with the idea of doing a project,
an exhibition on Sufi poetry.

The Muslim Voices project was about Sufi poetry
being sung by older generation within a mosque setting
and then being theatrically interpreted
by the younger generation in an urban setting.

And it's not entirely zero either.

There are constraints that we make quite clear.

So there are budget constraints,
there are time constraints,
if we're aiming for a display of some sort,
an exhibition of some sort,

which we usually are, that's got to be upfront.
So there are limitations. So, we had an idea.
We spoke to the Lightbox staff here.
As a community partner, they gave me the power
to decide what we wanted to do.
In the end, what I did was throw it back at the clients
to make the decision and let them take control
of what they wanted to do and where it went.
Okay, I'd say the biggest challenge is control.
We've done this sort of work
by ourselves before, we know we can do it,
so we have to remind ourselves
of why we are working with other people,
not giving things to other people.
A change of mindset.
Then there's time and sometimes these things take longer
than a project that's simply all mapped out
and you're sort of doing it by numbers.
Then there's simply money.
The money isn't always there
and funders aren't always keen
on funding things that have indeterminate outcomes.
Of course, that sometimes happens.
Sometimes it happens that we plan something,
we don't get the funding,
or for other reasons, it just falls through.
So it's being realistic
about the expectations.
Some of the benefits of working in this way
would be a natural interest from the community,
but if you're shoehorning something in
which is museum-lead,
then that interest will be there
for a short while but will not linger.
It's had some effect.
The organisation has become more open

to approaches coming from the community,
which we have followed up.

But it hasn't affected
the bulk of the exhibitions that we've put on,
which are not community exhibitions.

But in that area now,
we're working on ideas generation
from the community and it hasn't started yet
and we're still going through a process
with staff and trustees
in gaining agreement for this,
because it is quite a big step.

But the intention is to get community input into ideas;
not just for exhibitions,
but for marketing, for the shop,
for all sorts of areas of our work.