

## 6. Make/Shift Socials

Bringing local organisations and connectors together through making and connecting

It's very fulfilling to connect with people in this local area, especially as there isn't all that much here so it's been great to make connections and feel 'not so alone!' in being an artist in this area.

Post-event survey feedback



## About the project

Socials came out of the 'discovery stage' of Make/Shift and was part of 'making visible' the assets of the Amber Valley. The purpose was to create a space to get to know people, tap into knowledge, share information and build relationships.

It was structured as a series of networking events – specifically offering different organisations the chance to host socials. This was “an interesting way of us getting to know each organisation’s way of working” (Make/Shift Director, interview). It was also about testing out a 'nominations model' (see below).

The core partner organisations were Grow Outside, Fleet Arts and Platform Thirty<sup>1</sup> – with the latter taking the co-design lead with Make/Shift.

These three organisations were chosen in part to give 'nature', 'community' and 'creativity' focuses, and were involved in the design of the socials. Each hosted events and decided on the format of the meeting – with a focus on conversation, making and food.

## The Nominations Model

These were invite-only events. They started with each core organisation “nominating 3 or 4 people that they thought would be interesting to have as part of the conversation, and that might not always feel comfortable coming to something like that”.

The idea being the nominated people might not have thought an arts-focused event was for them. However, if specifically invited by

someone they knew they may attend – thus having the opportunity for their voice to be heard and new connections made.

Following on from the first social these invitees then nominated others to attend the next event. This produced “generations” of invitees and an ever-expanding network.

### Project Activities

- 5 x socials.
- 60 organisations reached.
- Each had 3 elements: making, food, social.
- Ran May to December 2023.
- Those who attended rated the socials highly for inclusion (89%), experimentation (77%), local networks (73%) and curiosity (73%).
- 4 generations: With people inviting new people each session, by the end there were 4<sup>th</sup> 'generation' invitees – creating an ever-expanding network.

# Outcomes

## Surveying the landscape

It became clear that very few people knew each other and there was a lack of cross-sector networking across Amber Valley.

The result of the Socials has been a greater understanding across different sectors of what is happening in Amber Valley and opportunities have arisen for organisations to work together.

For example:

- Artists and groups have discovered new venues that they might be able to use in future.
- Make/Shift has begun to develop a deeper understanding of Amber Valley
- Socials have sparked curiosity about Make/Shift and what it is all about.

What was apparent was that people were attending for several different reasons:

- For light touch networking.
- To engage in 'really meaty conversations about changing the world'.
- To 'learn new skills and actually do something more practical'.

## Connecting

The main outcome from the Socials was a chance for groups and organisations with multiple different focuses to meet each other and see commonality.

In the Impacts and Insight survey, everyone felt they'd interacted with new people, whatever their overall views were.

Given the lack of existing connections (identified in the feedback), this recognition of the existence of other groups and people with similar ways of seeing things is a strong outcome.

It will directly feed into the core Make/Shift outcome of

**Be part of a network that has resources to thrive which is used to shift power to a grassroots level**

and may feed into

**Recognise their role in developing creativity**

and

**Recognise the value of arts and culture for making change**

Make/Shift is understandably at an early stage with the Socials. However, people discovering each other across Amber Valley comes up in the feedback from every session:

**Realising that there were more creative projects, people, organisations and groups doing forward thinking work than I realised in the amber valley area.**

Finding out that this great long-term project is going on nearby and there are so many people with a similar ethos and similar projects ripe for collaboration.

Post-event survey feedback

## Valuing people

Furthermore, there was a strong positive response to being paid expenses for time in attending, very rare at networking events.

And the fee was very nice as often there is a feeling of unpaid labour at networking events.

Post-event survey feedback

People noted feeling valued which will feed into shifting perspectives.

## Getting people involved

There were outcomes at an individual level in terms of 'having a go' and some **igniting of curiosity** from taking part/ being made to take part in unfamiliar creative activities:

How much I enjoyed Zine Making - such a positive experience!

Arranging the cut flowers was very special. It was great to see the creativity of others coming out in so many different ways.

[What I found challenging?] Singing in Mexican!

Post-event survey feedback

The sense of 'being made to take part' clearly comes up in feedback. In particular, there was one event where clearly more thought was needed about how to integrate 'creating' with the fundamental aim of getting to know people:

I think everyone in the room was past a foundation level of communication skills, so the exercise - whilst amusing - was laboured and not at level for the people in the room.

Post-event survey feedback

## Shifting perceptions

There was recognition of the value of working in a different way, which seems to have **shifted perspective** on what is possible:

I really enjoyed your refreshing creative approach to holding the day, it being a non-traditional networking event was refreshing and felt like bringing something new to the area.

Post-event survey feedback

## Testing and learning

Make/Shift as a team and with their partners did get a **chance to test** which approaches work. They took the feedback process seriously and reflected after two socials how to adapt to the responses.

This thinking has fed into the several collaborative spaces which sit within the 2024-26 programme, including the Co-Lab and the Creative Agents.

Moving forward, there will be:

- Quarterly networking events
- Opportunities for peer mentoring through the Creative Agents programme
- A more “ideas generating” platform via the Mover, Shakers and Community Makers programme.

## Approaches

How did the Make/Shift approach work?

### Start with the strengths

*Recognise and make visible the assets which already exist around the Amber Valley.*

**Co-designing and delivering with locally based organisations, and hosting in different venues** engaged existing connections. This meant even the first workshop had a sense of having the right people there.

This built on the existing strengths of the area – its connectors – and made them visible to each other and others.

No one negatively commented on the make-up of this workshop despite invitees having come from three different invitation routes.

It had the further benefit that **Make/Shift didn't need to be the centre of any event, but could join in** with all the other organisations. It demonstrated they weren't trying to take leadership - but were also willing to take time to get to know people properly.

## Weave from the inside out

*Start small and grow through the ideas, hopes and ambitions of those involved.*

**Inviting attenders to suggest further people to invite** certainly worked and most people suggested a few others to invite. This meant that 60 people in total attended the socials. They came coming from a range of organisations with different focuses (community, creative, wellbeing, environmental etc).

There was a focus on 'starting small' with a sense this was more important than other outcomes:

*One of the outcomes was showing that Make/Shift are going to work in different ways ... it's like modelling that. We don't know exactly what we're going to get out of the socials. But we know that we're willing to try it and see what happens when people come together.*

Sam, Platform Thirty1, Co-design partner organisation

### Design to distribute

*Decentralising power and resources, encouraging rich interconnections and offering decision making to everyone.*

The design of the Socials was clearly meant to distribute leadership, power and resources.

There are several elements that worked well and show this desire for decentralisation:

- **Paying expenses for attendees' time** was welcomed.
- Co-design and delivery by partner organisations – rather than Make/Shift directly planning and running them
- Inviting each attendee to suggest new people, shows the intentions.
- Contacts were shared after each session meaning that people could directly follow up with people they had met.

However, not having fully managed to implement this principle has led to one of the identified challenges:

- **Lack of clarity over the purpose of the sessions** is raised by participants again and again. It seems to lead to a sense of lack of power in the process and a confusion around intent.

## Moving at the speed of trust

*Recognise that relationships take time and patience, building safe spaces.*

Make/Shift undoubtedly believes in this and it is a core part of their approach. However within the Socials, there were several issues which arose from not making enough time available.

- Repeated feedback talked about **sessions feeling too busy, lunch and other networking time not given the time needed.**
- There was also felt to be a **need for more sessions, so the trust within the group could be built up over time**, and the **lack of clarity over what the next stages were** didn't help this.

## Learning from Nature

*Using nature as a model to reimagine how we organise and approach.*

The way people welcomed meeting in the unusual setting of the Butterfly Garden shows they saw a value to this that they might not have expected.

However, this needs to not overemphasise structures, but take a more organic approach, for example, it was clear from feedback that the initial plan of the three parts, and including 'a creative workshop' didn't work when implemented over-literally. Instead the sessions which worked adapted and built on this as a framework, not a rigid requirement.

**Using creativity as a way to get people talking, particularly those who were less up for standing up and speaking** was very effective when facilitated well.

**I liked how there was a craft activity so people who were a bit more shy could ease into the conversations more slowly whilst focusing on craft.**

Participant feedback

**Meeting over making was a great ice breaker and a way for us to communicate and relate in a more connected way to each other.**

Participant feedback

But in at least one case this wasn't the case, leading to a clear sense of unease.

Furthermore, there seems to have been **too much of a sense from the session leads that there was a need to have plenty of creative activity** – which again led to discomfort and a sense of being rushed.

Although there was reflection and a chance to adjust this during the delivery, it doesn't seem to have positively affected the later sessions. Design for the future needs to build on what did work and learn from what didn't.

## Learnings

- **Using making as a way of bringing people together** and sharing really worked.
- **Creating as a group allows communication** –this worked better than working alone or when you can't talk to others.
- **Showing you value people's time** through offering a fee to attend is appreciated.
- **The value of Make/Shift not being the lead**, or even 'at the centre' of an event, but part of the network
- **The benefits of building a network and reaching new people through direct invitation by others** – people are more likely to attend and those who've attended become stronger parts of the network
- **The importance of making time to get to know people** – not feeling the need to 'fill the sessions' and running things for longer – or making clear what happens next – so people can get to know each other.
- **All facilitators understand and follow the Make/Shift principles** so people don't feel uncomfortable or 'forced' into activities.
- **Ensure the purpose and opportunities are communicated before, throughout and afterwards** so people feel able to input and share what they got out of it.