

## Make/Shift Phase 1 Evaluation Report

# Case study 3: Neighbourhood Creative Agents

Developing local creative leaders to shift power and resources to communities.

**[T]here's potential everywhere, in every house, on every street, and it's just about finding ways to unlock that.**

Jodie, Platform Thirty1

## About the project

This case study explores the Neighbourhood Creative Agents strand of Make/Shift's work. This strand supports **local residents to develop their skills as creative leaders in their own neighbourhoods – helping to shape and deliver community-led cultural projects**. Thus, the strand focuses on shifting power and resources towards communities.

Make/Shift ran this project in collaboration with partners Platform Thirty1, a locally based, women-led organisation that use creativity to generate agency and power. The Creative Agents themselves were

local people, invited to apply for the roles which ran from 2024-2026 in two rounds, involving 6 Creative Agents per round.

They took part in a 9-month learning journey whilst working in their local places within the Amber Valley, using their skills in natural crafting and wellbeing activities (among others) and utilising the communities' own interests to inspire and connect.

Make/Shift were clear this was a learning journey:

**Like you, we are learning as we go [...] Together we want to make the case for this way of working, building up evidence to demonstrate that investing in local people and relationships provides vital social and cultural infrastructure from which meaningful and lasting change can grow.**

Make/Shift Creative Agents - Phase 3 Proposal

There was also a community pot which Agents could draw from to support their work.

The second round saw a shift in recruitment focus, from people who already self-defined as artists towards community members who might not see their work as primarily creative. This aimed to further distribute power 'closer' to those with lived experience of their communities.

### Your commitment as a Neighbourhood Creative Agent:

- Put the ideas, energy, ambitions and stories of your community first
- Have a desire to support positive change through the vehicle of making and creating together
- Be curious about creating space for your community/ neighbours to make, do, share, grow, care for what matters to them
- Be ready to work on your doorstep and/or neighbouring community
- Hold an interest in building on your existing self-awareness and openness to self-reflection
- Have a willingness to learn in new group learning environments
- Have an existing commitment to your personal and professional development
- Participate fully in all organised sessions
- Work with the Platform Thirty1 and Make/Shift team to share learning
- Complete all monitoring/ reporting requirements for the evaluation as described in the Welcome Pack
- Attend social, collaboration and practice sharing events (optional)

### Our Commitment as organisers:

- We will offer training and peer learning sessions with experienced facilitators, building transferable skills and scaffolding that will support your activity as a Creative Agent
- We will provide some 1 to 1 support from the Platform Thirty1 and/or Make/Shift team (in addition to the sessions below) as requested and required
- We will be open and willing to learn from everyone's experience of the programme, and do what we can to develop the work as we go to ensure we reach the most positive outcome possible for all
- We will aim to accommodate any access and support needs you have in order to fully participate in the programme, and will be open and responsive throughout the programme
- You will be paid a fee of £975 for participating in this learning adventure from May '25 to March '26

From Neighbourhood Creative Agents Collaboration Agreement

## Approaches

### Trust the process

Make/Shift's approach to making is built upon exploration and 'learning through doing', trusting that results will naturally follow; Creative Agents is no exception. The initial brief quoted above exemplifies this idea of 'learning [together] as we go.' The lack of set outcomes and focus on the process, and supporting that as a learning adventure, is a key part in this. Also, the relationship was based on trust: Creative Agents were selected for their commitment to their communities, there was a trust that their approach would be right for that community, and the focus remained on supporting and sharing the learning – rather than any sense of dictating and monitoring outcomes.

### Start with strengths

As with all Make/Shift strands, Creative Agents reflects the asset-based approach of identifying 'what's strong, not what's wrong'. In this case, the strengths lie within the community, and Creative Agents aimed to uncover and engage the local people with these strengths.

**I feel this should happen, so I should be somebody who is willing to do that work, but in the process and especially through the consultations [...] there's so many different things going on [in our communities] that we just didn't know about.**

Jemma, Creative Agent

Like Jemma, other Creative Agents identified that gaining their communities' trust was a key resource that was needed for the

success of the project. This was done through making time – but also through recognising the strengths of any given community. The strengths and assets of each agent’s local settings were therefore central to both the approach taken and the work itself.

## Ecosystems not empires

The Creative Agent strand embodied, and regularly challenged itself around, the approach to shifting power away from central control (i.e. the Make/Shift team) and towards local community ‘ecosystems’. From the start, there was recognition that place-based projects – particularly those led by artists and creatives – can accidentally become about those delivering them, inadvertently reinforcing the ‘empires’ of those who have power in the area. Addressing this was one of the areas involving the most self-reflection and evolution of practice across the strand, and something which Platform Thirty1 (as delivery lead) took seriously:

**If we want to grow as an area, we're going to have to grow the people with us, because parachuting people in [is] not sustainable, and you just end up with very surface level delivery projects that come and go [...] You've got to grow things around you, on your feet [...] there's a lot of the truth and trust that comes in with that.**

Jodie, Platform Thirty1

As the second round of the Creative Agents was developed, learning from the successes and challenges of the first, one of the major changes was to explicitly look for agents who didn’t self-define as creatives or artists. This was one of the ways in which the strand

further developed the local ecosystem. For this round, by starting with the concept of working alongside people, recruitment and support changed and a different group were recruited who were supported to deliver in a different way. As a result, the practices of ‘unlearning’ that had been necessary for the first-round artists to strip back their own preconceptions were not as necessary, and this cohort were instead supported on a co-learning journey to become local creative leaders in their own right.

## Weave from inside out

Central to Make/Shift’s asset-based approach is the ethos of putting relationships first, so that trust is built at the grassroots level.

The sense of growing ‘on your feet’ (quoted above) refers to sharing space with the community and peers, and mimics the language of performance-based arts methods, of learning through doing – it fits with the ‘action learning’ approach of Creative People and Places programmes (CPPs) rather than ‘surface level’ methods that tend to be overlaid rather than woven in.

Agents appreciated that it was a space to test and learn; they themselves were given time and trust by Make/Shift and Platform Thirty1. This was built on a belief that as they were selected for their commitment to their communities, there was a trust that their approach would be right for that community. The focus of gatherings and workshops remained on supporting and sharing the learning – rather than any sense of dictating and monitoring outcomes.

In their turn, they recognised the need to take time and give people space, and to develop trust enough to make the first move. Sometimes it took time and patience for people to join in, but this was achieved by making things easy and friendly.

**[T]hat 'speed of trust' feels very important to me, and I wanted the last event to be a drop-in, and no pressure.**

Lise, Creative Agent

The 'speed of trust' is reiterated by contributors and partners across other Make/Shift project strands, ensuring that the work only progresses once trust has been built at each juncture. Creative Agents describe this in their approach to their facilitation practices:

**Getting people on the same page takes time and energy [...] I have learned where and when to push an open door and when to step back.**

Clare, Creative Agent

Putting relationships first also meant deciding to pay Agents for all of their time – the learning and sharing, as well as the project delivery, acknowledging the inherent value of their lived experience. This was more keenly noticed in the second cohort who had less experience of being paid for time spent in community building and connecting, as they were less likely to have been paid as 'creatives' before.

## Demonstrate possibilities

The Creative Agents strand was about imagining, trialling and reflecting on alternative ways to work in communities – to make something which could show others what can be possible.

**Honestly what I am learning is that what change I think I am making is a lot less important than the change the community thinks has been made.**

Cerian, Creative Agent

For example, several projects showcased to local people how creative skills and talents are not just 'expensive hobbies' but could be valuable building blocks for making the change they wanted to see in their local neighbourhoods:

**I think [the things] I will be doing are just stepping stones before people can start to really think imaginatively and ambitiously about how creativity can be used to make lives and the place better [...] without waiting for someone to come along and do it for them.**

Paola, Creative Agent

Thinking differently and avoiding falling into old patterns of focus on outputs and artist-led practice, or panicking about ensuring something ran at a speed that suited the agent rather than the place, was an ongoing creative challenge for Creative Agents. This formed a focal point of reflection within the sharing workshops and journals, summarised in a reflection that in reality they still have to feed the 'old system' (traditional funded arts sector approaches) whilst trying to create the new system (of change, reorganisation, 'new ways of doing things').

In one particular case, an Agent explained how they organised their working patterns more 'organically', being wary of workload, in favour of a professional 'sustainability'; if they overworked, they knew they would be less able to consistently contribute.

Longer, slower, more reflective delivery rhythms are employed to create the conditions for more organic growth, and a continuation and sustainability of these types of projects. Outcomes focused on 'building for the beyond' rather than just what happens during the funded period position the project for longer-term success.

## Outcomes

The outcomes for this strand of work relate to differences made to the Agents themselves, the communities that they serve and Make/Shift as a programme. As the Agents are also part of their communities, we acknowledge the crossover between these positions and consider the growth in local agency for both groups together, as well as the learning for the wider programme and for the local and national cultural and community development which Make/Shift seeks to inform.

## Making

### Local people are prepared to have a go

Creative Agents successfully engage their communities in new experiences of making, as illustrated in this story:

**My most recent ‘consultation’ event was at the artisan market in town. I could see a family who looked like they wanted to engage but were unsure. I made space for them and the young daughter sat down to make a vision board.**

**Her mum stood back a little [...] and it occurred to me that she might lack the confidence to join in rather than just not want to. I invited the mum to sit and she was delighted. She worked at the side of her daughter and created her own vision board [...]**

**Later in the day the husband came back; he had just learned that his wife had made something and wanted to see. He was so proud when I showed him!**

Creative Agent

In this example, the invitation to ‘have a go’ was even passed between generations of a family, demonstrating how ‘making space’ for engagement (both literally and conceptually) allows a network of creativity to form.

**[E]verybody felt like they were co creating the evening together. It [...] wasn't *my* show. It was everybody's show.**

Clare, Creative Agent

Although it is early days in terms of results, Creative Agents can see that they have ignited curiosity in their communities, and this has potentially developed other types of value as a result:

**[We] did manage to sow loads of seeds and that was the value [...] It was actually setting off the opportunity for creativity [...] to go and explore.**

Clare, Creative Agent

As a shorter-term outcome, the longer-term flourishing of creativity may not yet be directly identifiable – making is igniting curiosity as a means for change, not just a tangible outcome or product.

## Shifting

### Local community members have confidence to make a difference and lead on change

Working in a relational way also requires a confidence to fail, to make a difference by first trying things out. Creative Listener Amanda's work found that risk and fear of failure affected the Agents' productivity, but when acknowledged these things can be used to fuel the 'doing', as she mapped in this illustrated material response as part of her 'listening':

As non-artists, second-cohort Agents struggled with the peer-sharing aspects of the programme, and in particular a 'nervousness' was observed. Taking time to build bravery seems of paramount importance and Amanda found that support, care and trust 'matter more than optimisation or polish'.

Another outcome is that Agents came to recognise the importance of – and gain confidence in – their roles as social connectors in order to lead local change.

**This journey has allowed me to see how competent I am and [that] I can step out from the shadows and lead.**

Millie, Creative Agent

Confidence grew further when successes emerged. To best illustrate, we include here a story from one of the first-round Agents:

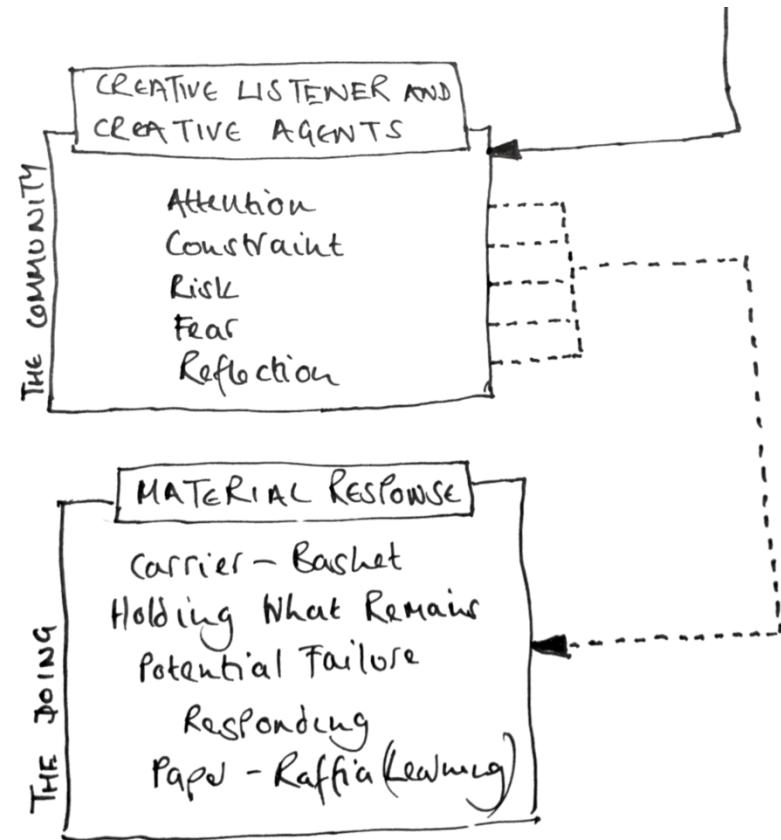


Figure 1: A hand-drawn diagram mapping 'holding Risk & Uncertainty as part of a material response' to Creative Agents

**[A]bout Ambergate: you've got these two main roads going through it, and the bit of road we're on, there's no houses on the opposite side. It's a big recreation ground, and then there's a bus stop. And so, you don't really see people [when you] come out of your house. [...]**

**[One Ambergate resident] said to me, "You know, this thing you're doing, it's working [...] I am seeing a lot more people out that I now recognise and say hello to me [...] and now people wave to me, and I speak to them, and I say hello to them". [...]**

**I used to think my workshops were more about process and discovery rather than product, but in all honesty they actually weren't, and this is about so much more. The art activity feels like the vessel for connection, it's the thing that keeps the hands busy whilst we talk. I do feel it is important for the participant to be proud of what they make, for their self-esteem, but it feels secondary to the mindfulness and the relationships made.**

Lise, Ambergate based Creative Agent

## **Local community members have increased knowledge and skills to resource and run projects**

As identified previously, the decision to widen recruitment in the second round to bring in a more varied level of making experience increased the stakes and allowed Make/Shift to test how the learning and skills development model would work under different conditions.

One of the newly appointed Agents stated:

**I'm not saying very much but I'm listening to others and noting wishes as well as getting inspired [...] I'll adapt and perhaps keep adapting quietly and with some control of the journey. The community is leading, YES!**

Creative Agent

At this early stage, the Agent appeared to be quite cautious in their approach, taking extra care to understand their community's needs before moving to action, demonstrating how this year's approach has been more about 'learning' from the ground up, rather than 'unlearning'.

Eight months later, the same Agent revealed how they had developed their practice:

**I whizzed round all 13 groups giving reassurance or ironing out resolvable problems, then leaving them alone to get on with things and to contact me if needed. I'd never worked liked this before [...] Thereafter, the 13 small groups worked independently but came together as one large group as well. Each person found something they became good at and all were eager to continue making for a few years.**

Creative Agent

Having 'never worked like this before', Creative Agents now recognise the work's likely continuation. This has been made possible through their own learning, and the skills, agency and support they've passed on, helping enable them to decide how their own activities, tools and

approaches could be employed in their own places, spaces and groups.

The Creative Agents noted this confidence and increase in skills to make a difference. In an early first-round reflection log, Agents scored the categories of 'personal qualities', 'current skills' and 'confidence' as 7.5/10 on average across all three. This, in part, demonstrates the strength of the first-round selection by Make/Shift and Platform Thirty1.

As an outcome from the second round Agents, they either struggled to adjust to community-centred working, or they believed themselves to already have the necessary skills: their scores averaged lower than the first cohort, with more range between individual scores. When rating 'knowledge of local networks', 1/10 scores were given, while one Agent gave themselves a 10/10 (an average score of 4.6/10). The disparity supports the need for a closer, more tailored approach to each individual when recruiting from a more diverse range of experience levels (such as non-artists).

### **Local communities, creatives and groups are part of a network that has resources to thrive which is used to shift power to a grass roots level**

Through the peer learning adventure, connections were developed between community leaders in hyperlocal areas across the Amber Valley who hadn't previously known each other, and in many cases had felt isolated in their attempts to support and make change in their communities. Platform Thirty1 and Make/Shift's soft-touch approach to supporting the Agents involved check-ins and advice, that really allowed them to develop their projects in their own way.

**[T]he attitude of Platform Thirty1 and Make/Shift being so open to anybody that approaches them, and encouraging and free with their advice, [meant that] at no point did I ever feel like I was an imposter.**

Cerian, Creative Agent

This mix of support and agency allowed Agents to feel more confident in their practice in communities. This is also true of the support network that developed between Agents as they connected with each other for peer support, and often delivery collaborations too:

**[T]here's been a really nice support network that's emerged through the program where the six of them have been sharing and advocating for each other [...]. So that's been great, because when you think about infrastructure and being people-powered, that's about relationships.**

Sam, Platform Thirty1

What extends the reach of Make/Shift is the ability or speed at which its values can permeate, and every indicator of possible success can spur its communities on as they both see the impact that their work can make and see themselves as part of the solutions it offers:

**I feel that I am part of a 'web' of things happening in my town. Lots of things seem to be happening, they have for a long time but it seems to be being recognised [...] I think my work is part of this movement.**

Creative Agent

## **Partners and team have tested and can articulate which approaches work in achieving Make/Shift aims**

Perhaps the most important outcome to reflect on with test and learn approach such as the one which Make/Shift and Platform Thirty<sup>1</sup> brought to their design of Neighbourhood Creative Agents was to have a chance to test ideas which they had discussed for years and explore – and then show how they work.

A huge amount of design practice was built into the programme, based on years of experience of Platform Thirty<sup>1</sup> in supporting creatives and communities making change. This was fed into the initial design of cohort 1, then iterated with feedback and experience into cohort 2.

As a result of the level of built in reflection there were some key pieces of learning in terms of what approaches can work – and where care needs to be taken, in this area of work.

**Creative Agents as 'living examples' to their peers:** Creative Agents are uniquely positioned to show their peers how work, creativity and community can be reorganised. In one example, an Agent's project was self-identified as a metaphor itself for 'not overthinking', a way of perceiving differently:

**[I]t was a kind of a metaphor for the way the Creative Agents were talking [...] insofar as you put materials together, you put the situation together, but you can't control what happens [...] Sometimes it's even better not to have any kind of preconceived idea, and just [act] without overthinking [...]**

**A time just to go – literally – 'with the flow' and let the paint and the pigments do their own thing, and you can just guide the flows.**

Paola, Creative Agent

**Agency is welcomed – when offered:** Make/Shift and partners have been able to articulate how agency is willingly taken up under the right conditions, and where the benefit to the local community can be seen, felt and heard:

**We know that people who live in their communities who plan to be around for a long time aren't only thinking about tomorrow [...] they are also thinking about paying that forward and being a good future ancestor.**

Jodie, Platform Thirty<sup>1</sup>

**How effective the model is in dispersing funding into hyperlocal communities where it is needed:** An outcome of getting funds and resources into the hands of communities (via their Agents) is that the value this generates is spread more widely, partly due to the diversity of projects and locations that are represented by the Agents. It is already possible to trace links outside of the Make/Shift network, as noted in other case studies in this series, not least the story of multiple people now collaborating in new ways:

**Me and two other women in the group were Creative Agents in the first cohort, another is a Creative Agent in the second cohort and was also on the community panel for Movers & Shakers. Two more have received funding through Movers & Shakers. Myself and one of**

**the others also set up a local ‘Creative Hive’ Alfreton network through our Creative Agent work.**

Jemma, Creative Agent and The Ripple Effect co-founder

**The challenges of certain types of decision making approaches :** Neighbourhood Creative Agents need to find the right ways of working for their own communities. Something which suits them, might not work for others. For example, Amanda, Make/Shift Creative Listener noted that encouraging people to work together for the first time can be itself a challenge: Agents must navigate existing family ties, friendships, and local politics.

**One of the individuals, she is dealing with a particularly difficult community who are odds with each other politically [...] the toll on her is really high.**

Amanda, Creative Listener

Make/Shift team members also recognised that receiving larger awards (than, say, the smaller Movers & Shakers pots) can cause social friction, leading to jealousy or perceived favouritism.

**Balancing the value of working in an alternative way with still needing to engage in the existing system:** Another outcome of this project is how it challenges the way making is traditionally resourced.

**You're not beholden to funders and things that you said you would do. And it did feel very free, and I kind of knew that if it didn't go that well, it wouldn't be a problem.**

Jemma, Creative Agent

The freeing aspects of Make/Shift's approach has some (necessary) tensions, such as still requiring some formal paperwork; however, the freedom allows for more learning through experimentation.

**Something that ‘sounds too good to be true’ can initially cause caution:** An outcome that Platform Thirty<sup>1</sup> identified was that because the open funding opportunity is uncommon, it ‘takes a while to calibrate into its honesty and main intention’.

**I felt initially that some of my peers felt a pressure to rush into ‘doing things’ and [...] they have [now] come [to] embrace the process of taking time, listening and responding to the community.**

Creative Agent

**The need to be aware of the ‘pressure’ of being funded for those more used to volunteering:** Resourcing the grass roots raises the question around ‘professionalising’ ‘hobbies’ or part-time creative practice – as echoed in other case studies (see Movers & Shakers and Wayfinding) – which deserves further attention. Some individuals express the pressure that paid work generates; others position this as the thing that provides the ‘validation’ that is empowering.

**[W]hen I know that I am being paid to do something that I enjoy, it makes me put pressure on myself and leads to overthinking – I feel that I’m not doing enough to earn the money [...] I’ve also learned that it’s okay to have boundaries and that I know my limitations, and I don’t have to always push myself outside of my comfort zone.**

Creative Agent

Supporting others to learn their 'boundaries', 'comfort zones', or motivations assists in countering this 'overthinking'.

**The myth of a 'simple replicable model':** After testing the Creative Agents model alongside Platform Thirty<sup>1</sup> and other partners, all express the complexity of a 'replicable' Make/Shift blueprint.

**I don't know if it's replicable. The approach obviously is, but you wouldn't get the same result with somebody else doing it [...] [T]here's only so much you can model and then the rest is subject to context.**

Claire T, Grow Outside, Learning Gatherer

Creative Agents, as a microcosm of the overall Make/Shift project, has a context-specific approach that recognises how 'context is king' in community-led work. Rachel, Make/Shift Director, further articulates:

**[T]he model isn't in *what* we're doing. The model is in *how* we work [...] in a values-led way.**

Challenges can arise when Agents become preoccupied with the making; successes occur when time is taken to listen to communities.

## Learnings

- **Slower pace enables deeper change** as slower delivery creates space for practitioners to think about the 'how' of their work, not just the 'what'.
- **Spending time early on clarifying that practitioners are 'alongsiders'** rather than 'service deliverers' shifts power and expectations. This reframing helps resist default 'systems thinking' that otherwise focuses on outputs and speed.
- **Learning is the core offer, not a by-product.** It takes explicit, repeated work to centre learning, reflection and sharing as the main purpose (with budget in service of that).
- **Meet people where they are:** If a session feels tense or unproductive, or if participants are not attending, leaders must be willing to redesign the program's delivery, such as **extending timelines or providing more informal support.**
- **Care must be taken at all levels** to ensure that the **pace of reflection, learning and change is adaptable and reflexive**, and this may require **closer attention to the needs of the individual** in the early stages to ensure this collective cohesion in the longer term.
- **Safeguarding is a consideration, with public visibility that often follows awards**, especially when dealing with potentially vulnerable populations who are first-time awardees.
- **Context is king:** underlying principles may be replicable, but the form has to be tailored locally each time.