



# Dukinfield Craft Café Storytelling Evaluation

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## Executive Summary

The Royal Exchange Theatre (RET) and Jigsaw Homes have worked in partnership for many years in Tameside. Their most recent 4-year partnership culminated in the development of a weekly Craft Café in Dukinfield at the Hub. Over the past year, artist Sam Edwards ran drop-in craft activities alongside a brew and a sandwich for residents in the area. The group have transformed their community hub in Dukinfield into a vibrant centre with artwork covering every wall. They've enjoyed shows at the Royal Exchange Theatre, learnt a range of crafting skills and formed friendships over tea, coffee and cakes. They've now established themselves as a Resident's Group called the People's Community Dukinfield with their own constitution, aiming to reduce isolation and provide opportunities and wellbeing activities for the community.

In Spring 2023, RET set out to evaluate the impact of the Craft Café - what has it meant for those involved? What impact has it had on their lives? What can we learn from this going forward? To help do this, we used a new approach - the Storytelling Evaluation Methodology. Following training from the Old Fire Station, Oxford, RET staff and volunteers collected the stories of eight people involved in the project in different ways. They then brought staff and partners together for a facilitated discussion session to identify themes and learning.

These stories bring to life the deep impact the project has had on those involved - people have developed meaningful friendships, broadened their horizons, built confidence and self-worth, and found a sense of pride and purpose in their community. The experience has reduced isolation and loneliness, supported people with their wellbeing, improved access to the arts, and provided a springboard for wider positive impact in the community. The legacy of this project, for the community, RET, and its funders, has been enduring.

The stories reinforce that the following factors were key in enabling these changes to happen:

- **Skilled facilitation**
- **Creative focus**
- **Trust and friendship**
- **Responsiveness and flexibility**
- **Location, cost and food**
- **Support**
- **Breadth of opportunities**

The report outlines this learning, alongside reflections on the experience of using Storytelling for the first time to evaluate impact.

Alongside this learning, we strongly encourage you to read the stories, which paint a vivid picture of the Dukinfield Craft Café, and the heartfelt impact it has had on those involved.



# Section 1: Background & Introduction

## Royal Exchange Theatre & Dukinfield Craft Café Project

The Royal Exchange Theatre (RET) and Jigsaw Homes have worked in partnership for many years in Tameside. Their most recent 4-year partnership has culminated in the development of a weekly Craft Café in Dukinfield at the Hub.

Over the past year artist Sam Edwards has run drop-in craft activities alongside a brew and a sandwich for residents of the area. The group have transformed their community hub in Dukinfield into a vibrant centre bursting with artwork covering every wall. They've enjoyed visits to watch shows at the Royal Exchange Theatre, learnt a range of crafting skills and formed friendships over tea, coffee and cakes. They've now established themselves as a Resident's Group called the People's Community Dukinfield with their own constitution, aiming to reduce isolation, provide opportunities and well-being activities for the community.

Alongside the Craft Café, the group manage the community allotment, create community events at Halloween, Christmas and Easter, developed a play which was performed at Oldham Coliseum and run a weekly lunch club serving hot meals for £1. The project is part of RET's community-based programme, Local Exchange, which aims to create a fair exchange between communities and artists, through long-term engagement based on co-creation with individuals, communities and partners. The approach RET take in each area is unique to that community - based on a four-year model of consultation, delivery, and legacy. This is one of the first legacy projects that has been delivered as part of the programme.

# Storytelling Evaluation Methodology

To evaluate the impact of the Dukinfield Craft Café, RET used the Storytelling Evaluation Methodology – RET’s first experience of this approach.

Storytelling was developed by the Old Fire Station, Oxford (OFS). Inspired by the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique, it involves collecting stories from participants about their experience of a project, and then bringing people together to discuss the stories and what can be learned from them.

Unlike conventional approaches to evaluation, Storytelling is not shaped by quantitative indicators developed in advance. Instead, the storytellers decide what impact looks and feels like for them. The approach is particularly effective for measuring change that is unexpected, emergent, personalised or diverse – and understanding how change happens. Its focuses on learning from positive change, and is often a meaningful, collaborative experience which centres the voices of those most involved.

The Storytelling methodology involves the following key stages:

1. **Identifying storytellers** – people who reflect a range of different perspectives on the project being evaluated.
2. **Collecting stories** – each storyteller meets with a trained OFS story collector. They have a conversation about their experience guided by four key questions: What has been your involvement? What’s changed you? Why is this change important? What enabled it to happen? Crucially, this is not an interview but a discussion – relaxed, informal and on the teller’s terms.
3. **Editing stories** – these conversations are recorded, transcribed and then edited down into 1-2-page stories, which aim to faithfully reflect the teller’s insights on the impact of the project, whilst keep the teller’s ‘voice’ in the story – telling it in their own words. The stories are then sent to the storytellers for their input and approval before being shared.
4. **Discussion Session** – we hold a facilitated discussion which brings together people with different perspectives and experiences in relation to the work to discuss the stories and the themes and learning emerging from them.

You can find out more about the methodology and how it works in practice [here](#).

## RET and Storytelling

In February 2023, OFS trained RET in the Storytelling methodology. In March and April, staff and volunteers collected stories from eight people involved the Craft Café in different ways –project participants, the lead artist and the chair of the residents group. They had conversations with these individuals (the storytellers) about their experiences and what it had meant for them. These conversations were recorded and transcribed, and then edited by writer Phillip Brennan into shorter stories which captured the experiences and voices of the storytellers.

In May 2023, RET brought together staff, local partners and funders to discuss the stories and the learning emerging. The session was facilitated by Sarah Cassidy (Head of Inclusion and Learning, Old Fire Station, Oxford).

The session was structured around 3 key discussions:

**Discussion 1: What struck people on reading the stories?  
What threads and themes are emerging?**

**Discussion 2: The stories in relation to four key outcomes**

**Discussion 3: Reflections on using the Storytelling methodology**

## Section 2: Impact & Learning

The initial discussion in groups focused on what struck and surprised people on reading the stories, and the threads and themes emerging.

### What was striking and surprising?

People were struck by the honesty, openness and courage of the storytellers in sharing their stories.

They were impressed by how deeply and holistically people reflected on their experience, and the skill of the story collectors in guiding these conversations. They were surprised and moved by how deeply people's lives had been impacted by the project.

*"The Craft Café has put me on the right track and lead me in a better direction. Before all this, I felt like I was going downhill. It was like going underwater, and you're drowning, and you can't get up. But since coming here: onwards and upwards. There's a big world out there. And I think more people who suffer with depression, fear of enclosed spaces, and things like that - you should put your mind to it and try and do something, rather than lock yourself away like I was doing. I never like crowded places. But now I feel like I'm open to going out and smiling more. I love them all at the Craft Café. Your arms grow grow grow every time you come, and they extend further and further afield, because there's just that many nice people. To think I've come this far. My life is actually worth living."*

**(To Think I've Come This Far)**

*"I think of the Craft Café as mine. It might sound selfish, but I don't mean it to be. It gets me out of the house. It's not my kids'. It's not my husbands'. It's not the charity's. It's just mine. I've got hold of it with two hands and I'm not letting go. It's my chance to see new friends, have a giggle, and learn new things. And I know it probably sounds very dramatic, but it has actually had a massive effect on my life. My daughter just laughs at me now and she goes, well, you have got a life now mother. But it's true. It might be one day a week. But it's a really important day of the week. This group has been an absolute lifesaver."*

**(Lifesaver)**

People were also struck by the contrast of light and dark in each story, the significance of relationships built, and the fundamental role of the artist in cultivating a space in which people could connect, create, grow and have a positive impact in their own lives and the wider community.

## Threads and Themes

Whilst each story offers a unique insight into someone's life and what matters to them, there are several resounding themes which come up again and again across the stories.

### 1. Mental health and wellbeing

Almost all of the stories mention the positive impact the project has had on their mental health and wellbeing. People value it as a space where they can talk, be quiet in the company of others, escape the day-to-day, laugh, make friends, and find strategies to cope.

*"Because of the Craft Café, my outlook on life has changed. I have mental health issues. I've tried taking my life a few times. I've self-harmed, taken overdoses, been in and out of hospital. But it's not been as bad now. I can tell myself, just get over and draw one of your pictures, just do something, because it takes your mind off it."*

**(To Think I've Come This Far)**

*"...the Craft Café is such a refreshing space. You can just sit and listen to people talking. You can get advice. It's good for your mental health. And I can get away from my role as a carer and a mum. At the Craft Café I'm not just my mum and dad's daughter, my kid's mum, my dad's carer. I'm me."*

**(I'm Me)**

### 2. Trust and friendship

Across the stories, people talk about the significance of the friendships they've built – people whom they can trust and call on in darker times and light. These friendships are the beating heart and are hugely valued by those involved.

*"There's a real welcoming culture across everything that happens in the hub now. It's a very open arms open heart kind of place. The majority of people coming to the caf were looking for friendships and community."*

**(Open Arms, Open Heart)**

*"I'm just glad that I ended up finding this group. I've gotten to know everybody. And everybody trusts you without them really knowing who you are. We've only been together for a year and some people will take years and years to decide they fully trust you. But here it's just where everybody's come together. They can talk to you about personal things, you can go to somebody's house and have a cuppa. I wouldn't be without the group now."*

**(Mine's a Cheese Sandwich)**

*"If you're feeling down, you know who to go to. If you've got a certain sense of humour or joke, you know who's going to get it and who isn't. I know I can pick up the phone to any one of the girls at any time, there's always somebody there for me, whether it's for help, advice, or just for a moan. Sam's like the life and soul of the party. She's so bright, so bubbly. She's just an absolute pleasure to be around. And it doesn't matter what mood you're in when you walk in that door. You know that when you go out, you're going to be smiling. We just click."*

**(I'm Me)**

### 3. Self-worth, confidence and pride

People mention how their confidence and self-worth have grown. They feel celebrated for who they are, where they're from, and what they've built together.

*"It's self-esteem as well, it's that confidence in myself that I'd lost. I don't think I've got it back, I think others have given it me back, because chatting to different people, different backgrounds, different personalities gives you so much."*

**(Lifesaver)**

*"I really did stumble out of that second maternity leave feeling like, oh, God, what am I going to do in this industry? It's not always kind to parents or carers. What the hell am I supposed to do? But I've found my stride completely in this community arts world. The regularity has helped me. And the combination of these women, these supportive incredible women, has helped guide me to this place I'm in now. It's been life changing. It's given me the chance to find my stride and confidence."*

**(Open Arms, Open Heart)**

*"Things seem to be changing around Dukinfield. There used to be a lot of vandalism. I was frightened about that when I first started the garden. But we haven't had any vandalism at all for the last 12 months. However, we did have three hanging baskets stolen. Why would anybody want to pinch hanging baskets? I can't understand. I was warned about the children around here, they can stick their hands through the fence, and they'll just pull everything up. But nothing's been pulled up. Maybe somebody had a word with them and said, people are trying to do a good thing here so leave them alone."*

**(A Little Corner of Dukinfield)**

### 4. Positivity, hope and fun

The fun and laughter shared at the Craft Café leaps out in almost every story – people enjoy the art, the company, the positive atmosphere, and the sense of hope it inspires.

*"So until I came here, I wasn't feeling that hopeful. I've always been optimistic, but sometimes when I listen to the news, it makes you think, do I even want to be here anymore? It's that awful. But then you come here, there's always something happening, you see people, you see people a lot worse than you, and you see people doing something wonderful. It's like a family. Everyone's smiley and happy."*

**(A Child's Eye)**

*"Here, over time, you expand your mind and your thought. And there's hope. You can't lose sight of hope. Because I always say that if you lose sight of hope, that's it, it's difficult to get that back. You've got to end up trying to give other people hope, when they feel as though they might have lost it. You've got to be positive, happy, even though you might be going through problems yourself. Try and pick other people up, because you do that and then you get picked up a bit yourself. I try and do that every single day. And this group does it as well."*

**(Mine's A Cheese Sandwich)**

*"The Craft Café gives me something to look forward to. I enjoy it more than ever now. If I couldn't come here, I don't know where I'd be. I love it. It's been the best thing in my life, most definitely. You got the art, the cook group, and the garden when it's nice. It's been a lifesaver for me."*

**(To Think I've Come This Far)**





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## 5. Strength and resilience

Many of the storytellers talk about harder times - loss, isolation, physical and mental health issues, and more. Their stories reinforce how strong and resilient people are in the face of adversity, and the strength that individuals draw from one another.

*"...you see the strength of people. It's the care, and how powerful it is. There's some people in here that are just amazing, the lives that they've lived, and the achievements."*

**(A Child's Eye)**

*"Since my Jack passed, I like to go out every day, so all this is a great outlet. But it's harder to do that now I don't have a car. Night times are always the worst. But funnily enough, and the hard thing is, I'm getting used to staying in. I don't want to be this little old lady that stays at home. I'm not that type. But I've got drive. I don't give up. However scared I am, I never give up."*

**(It's Got To Be About Love)**

## 6. Experiences of women

Except for one story, the stories offer an insight into the experiences of women in Dukinfield.

*"Historically we've been depicted as vessels because of our ability to hold children. But that doesn't define us. I've been so inspired by these women, there's so much more that self-identifying women hold within them and have the capacity to hold. I'd like to realise that project and involve the women in the group to make pots and maybe do some performance."*

**(Open Arms, Open Heart)**

*"A lot of people, including myself, we all have our little tribulations and trials. Things aren't always rosy, for people at home or in their own life. A lot of women get isolated, I think I did a bit. When I had my children, you sort of get a bit out of it. And it's not always nice in the school playground, sometimes it can be very bitchy. I think we've all been there, some of the women getting left out. Which is why having something like this, a place for anybody, is a good change. When you see the helping hands people give, and the love, you see the strength of people."*

**(A Child's Eye)**

## 7. Expanding horizons

People describe how the people and opportunities at the project have broadened their perspective.

*"The Craft Café is not just giving me somewhere to go and someone to talk to, it's widened my whole scope. I look at things and find things interesting that I didn't before."*

**(Lifesaver)**

*"...we're only just finding out what we can do. But in another few months it's all going to change again, because we're going to be thinking quite differently and our minds are going to be opened up even more as to what we can do. I'd like to knit and I'd like to learn how to crochet. With the sewing machine that we've got, we can get square pieces of material, sew them together, and make a patchwork picture type of thing. That's where your mind expands because you can just go, wow! It's endless as to what you can end up thinking of. What you can achieve just constantly grows, just like your confidence in people and people's confidence in you."*

**(Mine's a Cheese Sandwich)**

## 8. Empowerment and agency

Many of the storytellers feel empowered to bring about change through the group – both in their own lives, and the wider community.

*“...they kind of realised, oh, we’ve got agency, our voice matters, we can do things. Very quickly after that we started to make the cookbook, which was to raise funds for all their ideas. And you can still buy that online. We’ve raised over £500 already, which is over 500 meals for 500 people in Dukinfield.”*

### **(Open Arms, Open Heart)**

*“Helping other people doesn’t make me important or anything like that, but it’s nice to know that people can come up and talk to me. I feel like I’m useful. I can relate with other people. I know how far to go and where not to go and where you can go. You’ve got to listen to them and give them the options. You don’t have to suffer in silence here. I learned that one. You don’t suffer in silence.”*

### **(To Think I’ve Come This Far)**

*“The garden isn’t the sort of thing you do for recognition. It’s the sort of thing you do because you want to do it. I just like to be a volunteer. I like to do things for people. And that’s the end of the story. It’s giving something back to the community. I don’t want any praise. That’s not what I do it for. I’m just trying to make a little bit of difference. Seeing people smile, like the young children who come to the garden. They’ll plant some seeds, they’ll start to grow, and they’ll all grin and smile about it. That’s the best feeling in the world to have. It might be a little corner of Dukinfield but it’s making a difference. If they’ve made that corner a little bit different, then the world will be a better place.”*

### **(A Little Corner of Dukinfield)**

## Stories in relation to key outcomes

The stories were discussed in relation to four key outcomes:

- **Reduce social isolation and loneliness**
- **Increase access to the arts and creativity**
- **Create a lasting legacy within the community**
- **Empower residents to make a positive impact within their community through culture**

Each group focused on a different outcome, and thoughts about examples of this outcome in the stories and what enabled it to happen.

### **Reduce social isolation and loneliness**

*“Before the Craft Café, I think I was pushing myself backwards to the point where I was probably doing myself harm, mentally. I weren’t going out or associating with people. I weren’t even phoning people. I was getting to a point where I just cut myself off. My kids were phoning me and saying, you’re coming up for a brew or, do you want to go such a place, and I’ll say, no, I’m busy. I wasn’t busy, I just didn’t have the get up and go to do it. It’s Tuesdays at the Craft Café that’s brought that back out in me. It’s amazing. I don’t like to think where I’d be without it. I think it’s probably saved me from having depression or something along those lines.”*

### **(Lifesaver)**

*“It’s like a little community in itself. Everybody needs community, there’s too much isolation. And everybody needs people. The people here have adopted me! It doesn’t matter if I don’t finish what I’m doing. As long as I’m here, that’s it. This morning, I told them all I’m going to give them an extra big hug for Mother’s Day. I’m the huggy one.”*

### **(It’s Got to Be About Love)**

*“I think an awful lot of people felt isolated before finding this group. But I get on with everybody. They all make you feel as though you’re welcomed in everything. I can say to a friend, fancy going down to the hub? It could be any day of the week, we’ll try and do some decorations or catch up on things we haven’t finished. It just gets you talking and laughing and you get to have a bit of fun.”*

### **(Mine’s A Cheese Sandwich)**

Many of the storytellers talk about their experience of isolation and loneliness. This is driven by a range of factors, including unemployment, poor health, past trauma, Covid, having children, lack of confidence and mental wellbeing. They share the direct role the project has played in helping to reduce this through lasting friendships, support, and a sense of purpose and belonging.

### What helped enable this to happen?

*Sometimes you can come and you can just sit here and Sam will say, are you okay? And if you want to talk you can go find a little room or cubbyhole or whatever. And if you don't want to talk, that's fine. So it's brilliant. Because everybody's going through loads of stuff. I had a couple of weeks off over Christmas because I'm a carer for my dad, we had a few things going on. But the group don't just turn around and say oh, you can't come you've not been for two or three weeks. Everyone kept in touch and so did Sam and we all went out together.*

**(I'm Me)**

*"It's a whole mixture of different personalities. But we've all got that one thing in common, and that's the Craft Café".*

**(Lifesaver)**

*"There's a real welcoming culture across everything that happens in the hub now. It's a very open arms open heart kind of place. The majority of people coming to the caf were looking for friendships and community."*

**(Open Arms, Open Heart)**

*"When you've got depression, it's the fear of the unknown, fear of people you don't know. A new place can feel like you're walking into a lion's den. But when I come to the Craft Café, everybody's giving me hugs. It's full of kittens rather than lions."*

**(To Think I've Come this Far)**

- **Warm welcome** – from the moment people walked through the door they felt welcome and put at ease by the artist and wider members of the group.
- **Food, cost, location** – the project was free, on people's doorsteps, and always included a sandwich and a cup of tea.
- **Gentle facilitation** – the artist facilitated a gentle, informal space where people felt able to engage at their own pace.
- **Creative focus** – having a creative activity to focus on provided a shared point of connection.
- **Word of mouth** – people often heard about the project through other people, helping them to take the first step in coming along.
- **Neutrality** – the project was instigated and facilitated by someone neutral to the community, distanced from any pre-existing power struggles and dynamics. This helped to establish a space where everyone felt able to engage on their own terms.
- **Safe, supportive space** – the artist helped to create a flexible space where people felt able to be themselves and knew if they wanted to talk there was someone to listen.
- **Fun and positive** – the group was somewhere you could go to have fun, laugh and feel a sense of optimism.
- **Regularity** – people were able to meet on a regular basis, building ideas, projects and friendships over many weeks. When someone wasn't able to join for a number of weeks the group would reach out to let them know they were thinking of them.
- **Friendship** – all of these things created a space in which people were able to get to know one another and develop meaningful and trusted friendships. The stories reinforce again and again how significant these relationships have been as a source of connection, support and motivation.

## Increase access to the arts and creativity

*“My aunt used to paint. I always wanted to paint and draw and stuff. But I was never that good at art. I just wanted to do crafts. In lockdown I was doing pictures for a friend’s daughter. She was off school and I had all these stencils. I was doing fairies and trying to do this picture and I thought, this is what I want to do! But at the time, where I lived, nobody was interested. Now, at the Craft Café I’ve been able to find people with a common interest. You can just be yourself. And we feed off each other. I feel as though that I’ve made the right move in finding this group. You just end up belonging.”*

**(Mine’s A Cheese Sandwich)**

*You think wow, did I do that? Because of the watercolours and how it blended and stuff, I felt like an artist.*

**(I’m Me)**

*“An old lady actually bought a few pictures that I’ve done. I was showing her them at the bus station in Ashton. They were signed because when she got them she goes, oh, I can tell somebody they were signed by the artist. I’m not an artist, but I thought, that sounds really nice. And she gave me £20. She goes, is that enough to cover your stuff that you use? I said, it’s more than enough, you don’t even have to pay me. She said, oh no, I’ve got to pay you. So that’s a nice thing, to think that somebody is actually out there and said you’re an artist. Even though I know I’m not, it sounds truly amazing.”*

**(To Think I’ve Come this Far)**

*“What they’ve done here is absolutely amazing. For example, we’ve done this play which Sheila wrote. She wrote this thing about Dukinfield. It was fun. I’d done acting on zoom with the Exchange over lockdown but acting on stage was a first for me. And then on Thursday, we were at the Royal Exchange. Bill from the Elders was doing a musical, and Helen has written this book of poems, so most of us turned up to read the poetry and perform. So it was quite a week!”*

**(It’s Got to Be About Love)**

Through the project, people have accessed a breadth of different creative opportunities. They mention making jewelry, paper mâché, crochet, aprons, bird boxes, banners and more. They’ve also written and performed a play about Dukinfield, created a recipe book, and attended acting workshops and theatre trips. Telling their story through this evaluation has also been a creative experience in and of itself.

People have enjoyed trying new things and feel proud and recognised for what they’ve achieved as artists. They describe the role it’s played in unlocking their creativity, developing confidence in their skills, and helping them to connect with others who share creative interests. Through this experience, they have gone on to lead creative initiatives within the community – from fairy trails to Easter celebrations – which has increased access to the arts beyond the group itself.

### What helped enable this to happen?

*“As an artist, I would just be really responsive to the group. Someone would express an interest in paper mâché so we’d have a go at paper mâché. We’d make jewellery because someone said they’d like to make jewellery. As it does with any community group, we have the luxury of being together every week. Amazing conversations started to happen over the craft which began to inform the art we made. For example, there was lots of discussion about the menopause, what it is to be a woman over different generations. We would talk about what it is to be a woman now. In response we made self-portraits, some beautiful mosaics, which got hung in the garden as a self-celebration.”*

**(Open Arms, Open Heart)**

*“During the crafts you’re not set on one thing, you can do anything, even though Sam sets out what we’re going to do. We can end up thinking or saying to Sam: I can’t do that yet. I’ll just do my own thing. And she’ll go yeah, that’s fine.”*

**(I’m Me)**

*“What you make doesn’t have to be perfect, even though I want it to be absolutely perfect. But we’re all self-critical like that.”*

**(Mine’s A Cheese Sandwich)**

*“I hope this kind of thing spreads. People just don’t have the money to go out, so the fact that there’s the outreach thing here makes a huge difference.”*

**(A Child’s Eye)**

*“My highlight is watching this group of women discover arts and theatre. Quite a few of the participants have never even been in a theatre before. To all go together and sit together and watch a piece of theatre, to talk about the narrative, the costume, and the lights was amazing. And now they feel like that theatre is their own. We’ve got participants who were like, I don’t draw, I’m not creative. And now they’re drawing pictures daily, working in different mediums, and making art every day. So overall, it’s just watching all these amazing women flourish, discovering creativity and taking ownership of it.”*

**(Open Arms, Open Heart)**

- **Being responsive to the group** - sometimes the craft was led by the artist, other times work was co-created and initiated by the group. This flexible way of working enabled co-creation to happen more organically, led by the energy and interests of those involved, whilst making space for the artist to lead and introduce new ideas.
- **Space to give things a go** - the artist cultivated a space where people felt able to try new things, and it didn't matter if they made mistakes.
- **Stretching people** - people felt encouraged and supported to stretch themselves, both by the artist and one another. People found it fulfilling and motivating seeing their own progress and accomplishments.
- **Enjoyable and relaxed process** - the group worked at a relaxed pace, with plenty of space for conversation.
- **Access to materials** - the café provided people with the materials, whilst also instilling a sense that anything could be a material and often made use of recyclable, reusable materials which people could find at home.
- **Breadth of opportunities** - from theatre making to paper mâché, the group engaged with a breadth of opportunities, always trying new things. This has broadened people's horizons, kept things interesting, and given people confidence engaging with a range of mediums.
- **Accessible** - the project was free, weekly, local and welcoming, with food and tea provided.
- **Open to different levels of engagement** - whilst some people came for the art, others are more motivated by the opportunity to spend some time with others. All levels of interest and engagement were welcome.



## Create a lasting legacy within the community

*“There’s this idea for the group to bleed out into the community, to create something that will be accessed by people from Dukinfield that don’t come to the group or even the centre. That’s what the fairy doors and the cookbooks are about. And I know that the cookbook has gone as far as Canada and Portugal. It’s this idea of dominoes falling, like wind on grass, that idea of a ripple out.”*

**(Open Arms, Open Heart)**

*“Today I’ve been doing these Easter chicks. I thought, what I’m gonna do is try and cut this shape out, stick it on there. It’s just so simple, but it creates a different effect. It looks more 3D and bright. That’s all we’re trying to do, put the colour back in, not just for the hub but for the community.”*

**(Mine’s A Cheese Sandwich)**

*“A community should be for everybody. It doesn’t matter if you’re rich or you’re poor. It doesn’t matter what your age or ethnicity is. You just come in here to do certain things. For example, we did a recipe book with Sam Edwards which also included some of our artwork and Julie Hesmondhalgh also added her recipe. Everyone from Royal Exchange has been so supportive. We all added our own recipes, mine was a chicken soup without the chicken. A cup of soup, loads of veg, and wine in there as well. Wine makes everything taste nicer! We sold a few of them, even sold them door to door. Then we put a funding page up and I think we got about 500 or something like that. The money goes back into the community fund. It’s money to do more of what we want to do, like Lunch Club.”*

**(A Little Corner of Dukinfield)**

There are several different types of legacy mentioned in the stories.

The project has had a personal legacy for individuals through the impact it’s had on their lives. This has had a ripple effect, inspiring people to extend the same friendships, creativity and support they received to others.

The project has also had a legacy within the community. The Wednesday lunch club and Halloween, Easter and Christmas events have continued beyond the project. The work has also created positive stories of Dukinfield, as a place with community at its heart.

The way in which the group has established itself beyond the initial project as a residents group with its own constitution and community fund, is a lasting legacy for RET and funders.

## What helped enable this to happen?

*“Community groups aren’t always that easy to get off the ground. But quite a few different people have come into this one and said they’ve not seen anything like it. It’s just a coincidence of people coming together. I think we’ve been very equal with everybody. Nobody was like the super boss or anything. People think it’s a fairy tale that people can work together. It’s not a fairy tale. It’s quite easy. Everybody’s friendly here, people do what they can, and it works.”*

**(A Little Corner of Dukinfield)**

*“There was only a few of us at the beginning. We sat around having tea and telling stories. It was good and you’d look forward to coming. We’re all very friendly. And then next door there was a food pantry. We saw how many people were using that, so we tried to do things to help the community. Lunch Club is one of those things, and it’s been really beneficial. It’s like a good homecooked dinner. People can have company. They can have as many drinks as they want. It’s somewhere to come that takes the stress away from food poverty and electricity prices. It’s picked up quite a few people now.”*

**(A Child’s Eye)**

- **Necessity** - the cost-of-living crisis, amongst other social factors, mean the lunch club and community events are utilised and continue to be needed within the community.
- **Support** - the group has felt supported by Jigsaw Homes and RET in setting itself up as a residents’ group and taking things forward independently.
- **Networks of friends** - people are motivated to want to continue to work together as a group, with people they have developed close relationships with.
- **Building on success** - through the project people have seen the value of the group and the impact it can have. This is something they feel motivated to grow and sustain.





## Empower residents to make a positive impact in their community through culture

*“After Covid, when there were queues for the food banks and trouble with the economy, we ran a garden day and made a banner in support. It was about saying enough is enough. We got the MP for Dukinfield at the time, Andrew Gywnne, to receive it. It was in the press and the local news. It was just to send a message to the government to say, get on with it. There needs to more done to change the economy. It’s not fair. And it’s not equal.”*

**(A Child’s Eye)**

*“Our conversations carried on to the cost-of-living crisis. We talked about how there’s different forms of activism and how we use our art here as activism. We made a big wall hanging to give to our MP to coincide with the ‘Enough is Enough’ campaign. We invited him over, he had a chat and fizzy orange juice with us, and he put the wall hanging up in his drop in!”*

**(Open Arms, Open Heart)**

The stories recount many of the different ways the group has had a positive impact in the community. From creating a community garden for residents, to hosting a weekly £1 lunch club. Organising Easter hunts, to Halloween parties for the children. Presenting a banner to their local MP on food banks and the economy, to writing and performing together a play about Dukinfield at Oldham Coliseum. The community garden is a fitting metaphor for the way in which the group has taken root and provided the grounding for people to have an impact within their community.

## What helped enable this to happen?

*“It’s been like a proper community. It’s all about working together. You can’t rely on the government to do it. They should have services like this in place already. But if we’re not getting them, we have to do them ourselves.”*

**(A Child’s Eye)**

*“It’s the sort of thing you do because you want to do it. I just like to be a volunteer. I like to do things for people. And that’s the end of the story. It’s giving something back to the community. I don’t want any praise. That’s not what I do it for. I’m just trying to make a little bit of difference.”*

**(A Little Corner of Dukinfield)**

*“So if we can help people while having fun, it’s sharing what we benefit from. I enjoy what I do. And I know without it, I think I’d be lost.”*

**(Lifesaver)**

*“One of the best things we did was a play at Oldham Coliseum. They did an outreach thing. Yusuf came, he was the director, and asked for a few ideas for writing. Everybody said what they wanted to do. The play was about the group itself, and about Oldham closing, and we ended up performing it at the Coliseum. None of us had ever done anything like that before. We’d done so much rehearsing but loads of things went wrong. And then they went right again. It was a fantastic day. It was such a lovely experience. You’d think we’d be a bag of nerves, we probably were a bit before, but everybody was really happy. It was such a sense of achievement. It was just about being there.”*

**(A Child’s Eye)**



- **Strength in numbers** - being part of a group who recognised shared challenges and needs within their community gave people the motivation and strength to work together to bring about change.
- **Being part of something bigger than you** - people felt able to overcome their inhibitions, speak out, stand up on a stage, because they believed in the cause, and it was about something bigger than them.
- **Creativity** - the Craft Café was a gentle starting point for building connections and having conversations about art, activism and social issues.
- **Fun and reward** - people had fun in the process and found that they enjoyed volunteering and being part of something which aimed to make a positive difference.
- **Ripple effect** - feeling proud of yourself and what you're involved with inspired an activism within, and a will to share this sense of empowerment with others.
- **Equality** - people feel valued as equals and united towards a common goal.
- **Need** - a recognition that if you want things to change you need to make it happen yourself.

### Key considerations

As part of these discussions, participants discussed any challenges mentioned in the stories which might get in the way of this outcome.

The group was set up and is predominantly attended by women. The only story which doesn't discuss the impact of the project on their life and wellbeing is told from the perspective of a man. This raised questions about whether the make-up of the group, and whether the emphasis on craft, impacted who attended.

The stories reaffirm the important role of the artist in creating such a welcoming, social and enjoyable space. It shows how important it is to have someone in this role who is not just an expert in their medium, but also able to cultivate this sort of space and dynamic. By the same token, it raised questions around the implication of being so reliant on one individual, and how the group can sustain this once working independently.

*"Things wouldn't be the same without Sam. I noticed a difference when she hasn't been able to make it. When she's here, everything's flowing. And then when she wasn't it was kind of like standstill. She brings stuff from home so you can't really do what you want to do if she's not here. And she's also just a dead good person, always happy and praising. Oh, you look beautiful today. And the things she comes out with? I don't know what the word is for it. But she makes you feel good about yourself. She picks out the positives all the time. She's unique. You'll never find another Sam."*

**(I'm Me)**

# Section 3: Reflections on the Storytelling Methodology

## Benefits of the approach

- The stories are captivating and immersive – you step into someone’s world, their language, emotions and experience. This makes it easy to connect and empathise with the storytellers in a human way.
- The stories capture detail, complexity and depth and paint a fuller picture of impact.
- They reaffirm the power the arts can have in transforming people’s lives.
- They enable people far away from the project to understand and connect with the work.
- The learning from the process is collaborative and rich.
- It gives participants agency to speak about their experiences on their own terms, using their own voice and words.
- For those telling their stories, it was a powerful and meaningful experience telling their story and reading it back.
- Participants feel listened to and valued as part of the process.
- The discussion session gives people time to analyse the data and really listen to the stories – something which often isn’t given as much collective focus.
- The process provokes rich discussion rooted in something that feels real.
- The stories help to champion the projects and articulate impact for RET.
- The process is less stressful to implement than other evaluation methodologies.
- The creative nature of the approach feels aligned with RET.

## Challenges and Considerations

- The stories focus on regular attendees – how do you capture the stories of people who aren’t there, or who attended once and didn’t come back?
- It’s a lengthy process.
- It can be emotional, and people aren’t always in the right place to share their stories.
- The stories only capture one moment through a journey that hasn’t ended.
- There is a risk people feel compelled to make the story have a happy ending for self-preservation.
- The positive focus of the stories means there is risk of confirmation bias.
- What space can we make alongside this for critical feedback on the project – how can we learn from that?
- The stories capture distance travelled, but there are other measures needed to understand success.

## Using the stories and learning

- The stories could be used creatively, as theatre pieces, audio files, exhibitions and more.
- Storytellers could be asked how they would like to use their stories going forward.
- The voice recordings could potentially be used.
- You could create an archive of stories collected.
- It would be helpful to capture feedback from storytellers on the process, and the impact of telling their stories.
- The learning could be used to inform the development of future projects with communities.

## Taking the methodology forward

- The approach has the potential to add lots of value to RET community engagement work going forward.
- It could be embedded in more activities - even if it's just a couple of stories.
- It would be interesting to repeat it in 6-12 months to see how the stories change, or what new stories emerge.
- It could be used to evaluate processes with employees.
- Could participants feed into the analysis process?
- It would be good to ask 'what could work better' for some projects.



## Conclusion

The stories reaffirm the impact that the Craft Café has had for the community of Dukinfield. The people involved have developed meaningful friendships, broadened their horizons, built confidence and self-worth, and found a sense of pride and purpose in their community. The experience has reduced isolation and loneliness, supported people with their wellbeing, improved access to the arts, and provided a springboard for wider positive impact in the community. The legacy for individuals, the community, RET and funders has been enduring.

The stories reinforce that the following things were key in enabling these changes to happen:

- **Skilled facilitation** - having a lead artist from outside the community who not only brings creative expertise but is also skilled in cultivating a welcoming and safe space where people feel supported and able to experiment and try new things.
- **Creative focus** - using craft and creativity as a common point of connection, and as a springboard for wider community action.
- **Trust and friendship** - creating space for people to develop and nurture meaningful and trusted friendships.
- **Responsiveness** - being led by the interests and energy of the group, including a balance of both co-created and artist-led practice.
- **Local, free, food** - having something on the doorstep with free food, drinks and materials.
- **Support** - from the artist, one another, and Jigsaw Homes and RET.
- **Breadth of opportunities** - offering a range of opportunities across the arts and beyond.

The Storytelling methodology has been a meaningful process which has led to powerful, rich learning. Whilst there are some helpful learnings, about the time-commitment, positive focus and emotional weight of the stories, it has potential to continue to add value to RET community engagement work going forward.

# The stories

## A Child's Eye

The firm I worked for kind of went bust. They offered the men redundancy, but not me and the other women. So I couldn't properly retire. It was a bit of a thing, because I started when I was 15. You paid all them stamps and then they just run off with the money. There's hundreds of people that it's happening to, and particularly women. After that, I didn't think I was going to get back into work. If I did, it was going to be a very low paid job, there wouldn't be that many hours in it. But I wanted something to do. So the hub came in at a really good time. It wasn't something I expected.

There was only a few of us at the beginning. We sat around having tea and telling stories. It was good and you'd look forward to coming. We're all very friendly. And then next door there was a food pantry. We saw how many people were using that, so we tried to do things to help the community. Lunch Club is one of those things, and it's been really beneficial. It's like a good home-cooked dinner. People can have company. They can have as many drinks as they want. It's somewhere to come that takes the stress away from food poverty and electricity prices. It's picked up quite a few people now.

I've just taken over as secretary, while we find someone permanent. I just take the minutes. Because I don't have a computer, John from Jigsaw Holmes does the typing up for me. I've seen such a difference in the people that come to the hub. We've had open days, we've done Halloween, storytelling, gardening and planting for a local primary school. It's been like a proper community. It's all about working together. You can't rely on the government to do it. They should have services like this in place already. But if we're not getting them, we have to do them ourselves.

Community groups aren't always that easy to get off the ground. But quite a few different people have come into this one and said they've not seen anything like it. It's just a coincidence of people coming together. I think we've been very equal with everybody. Nobody was like the super boss or anything. People think it's a fairy tale that people can work together. It's not a fairy tale. It's quite easy. Everybody's friendly here, people do what they can, and it works.

A community should be for everybody. It doesn't matter if you're rich or you're poor. It doesn't matter what your age or ethnicity is. You just come in here to do certain things. For example, we did a recipe book with Sam Edwards which also included some of our artwork and Julie Hesmondhalgh also added her recipe. Everyone from Royal Exchange has been so supportive. We all added our own recipes, mine was a chicken soup without the chicken. A cup of soup, loads of veg, and wine in there as well. Wine makes everything taste nicer! We sold a few of them, even sold them door to door. The we put a funding page up and I think we got about 500 or something like that. The money goes back into the community fund. It's money to do more of what we want to do, like Lunch Club.

After Covid, when there were queues for the food banks and trouble with the economy, we ran a garden day and made a banner in support. It was about saying enough is enough. We got the MP for Dukinfield at the time, Andrew Gwynne, to receive it. It was in the press and the local news. It was just to send a message to the government to say, get on with it. There needs to more done to change the economy. It's not fair. And it's not equal.

One of the best things we did was a play at Oldham Coliseum. They did an outreach thing. Yusuf came, he was the director, and asked for a few ideas for writing. Everybody said what they wanted to do. The play was about the group itself, and about Oldham closing, and we ended up performing it at the Coliseum. None of us had ever done anything like that before. We'd done so much rehearsing but loads of things went wrong. And then they went right again. It was a fantastic day. It was such a lovely experience. You'd think we'd be a bag of nerves, we probably were a bit before, but everybody was really happy. It was such a sense of achievement. It was just about being there.

I love seeing everyone's strength. A lot of people, including myself, we all have our little tribulations and trials. Things aren't always rosy, for people at home or in their own life. A lot of women get isolated, I think I did a bit. When I had my children, you sort of get a bit out of it. And it's not always nice in the school playground, sometimes it can be very bitchy. I think we've all been there, some of the women getting left out. Which is why having something like this, a place for anybody, is a good change. When you see the helping hands people give, and the love, you see the strength of people.

Some of us older ones, we could drop dead any minute. We've all got health conditions, some quite serious. But you have to carry on. One of the narrators in the play, before it was staged, she ended up having a heart attack or a DVT. She was in hospital. So we were coming in and doing more rehearsals to try and get it right. And then we'd go off and visit her. And now she's back here and she's seen the play. That's what I mean when I say you see the strength of people. It's the care, and how powerful it is. There's some people in here that are just amazing, the lives that they've lived, and the achievements.

I hope this kind of thing spreads. People just don't have the money to go out, so the fact that there's the outreach thing here makes a huge difference. As you get older, you realise how short life is. You're going to think, I wish I'd been with my family more. So until I came here, I wasn't feeling that hopeful. I've always been optimistic, but sometimes when I listen to the news, it makes you think, do I even want to be here anymore? It's that awful. But then you come here, there's always something happening, you see people, you see people a lot worse than you, and you see people doing something wonderful. It's like a family. Everyone's smiley and happy. I'm looking around with a child's eye. When you're a child everything is so awesome, but you don't think of things like that as an adult. With the hub, I've gone back to feeling awesome about things.

## A Little Corner of Dukinfield

I've always been a volunteer. Even when I was working, I was volunteering at Acresfield Road. Not long before I retired, I used to be chairman of a resident's group in Hyde. I had a problem there, an incident where the police were involved. Somebody was threatening me and the wife. So we had to move out of the area. But the atmosphere's a lot better here. My old group used to be a clique. To say the least, there was all backbiting and everything. But there's no backbiting, there's no talking behind each other's back here. If you've got a problem, you face it head on at the next meeting. You say what your problem is and get it sorted. And then once the meeting's finished and we go through them doors, then we forget about it. We're a happy bunch. We're all on an equal footing.

It was John's idea to start a resident's group. Then we had Action Together come in to introduce us to Paul. We've got a constitution together, we've done the code of conduct, and so we're officially a resident's group. It's a good thing because now you can decide it's not only the garden involved in the group, it's all the other activities as well. For instance, bingo night, quiz night, and the social evening. You volunteer on a weekly or monthly basis. You've got to love it. And like I often say, if it weren't for volunteers, half the country would collapse.

I'm the one that chairs meetings. But I principally run the garden, which I was asked to do by one of the Jigsaw people. I've been gardening about 45 or 50 years and I used to do a garden in Newton in Hyde. They knew what a good job I'd done, so when they asked me if I would be willing to do the garden I said yeah, no problem. It's something to keep me sharp. There were nothing in the garden last year. But at any time the community can come and do some gardening and seeding or whatever they want to do. I don't turn around and say you can't come in here. I'll stay there until they've done what they're doing. I've been doing this just about twelve months now. At the moment I'm doing all the seedlings and germinating the seeds for the garden, like peas, carrots, and cabbage, things like that.

On Wednesdays we have Lunch Club, which started about seven weeks ago now. We charge a pound for lunch and as many brews as they want, which is nothing really is it? It's to help out with the cost of living. I do some English meals like shepherd's pie, casseroles, cheese and onion pie, meat pie. I might do some Caribbean cooking next time. I'll do some jerk chicken. A lot of people can only afford to eat once a day, so it's important that we get them at least a good wholesome meal. We get about 30 people. We've had 35 before, but they come at different times. Some people at 12 o'clock. Some people at half-one. I'm the cooking person, but I have opened the job to everyone else. I said in a resident's meeting, anybody who wants to take over as chef, please do! Give me a day off! But I used to do the cooking for weddings. I even did my own wedding.

Things seem to be changing around Dukinfield. There used to be a lot of vandalism. I was frightened about that when I first started the garden. But we haven't had any vandalism at all for the last 12 months. However, we did have three hanging baskets stolen. Why would anybody want to pinch hanging baskets? I can't understand. I was warned about the children around here, they can stick their hands through the fence, and they'll just pull everything up. But nothing's been pulled up. Maybe somebody had a word with them and said, people are trying to do a good thing here so leave them alone. Overall, I think the resident's group is having quite a good impact. We get a lot of people coming

again and again and they can't wait for the next event. But as regards to the garden, it's difficult to get people to come. I don't know why, because it's really therapeutic. We've got in touch with the NHS, doctor surgeries, CGL, to get them to prescribe the garden to people with drug and alcohol misuse. It's a good way to lose yourself for an hour. It takes all the problems away.

Most days when I'm on the garden, people walk by and say hiya, how are you doing, alright? So that makes a difference as well. At least then you know that people are noticing what's going on. And they're not just ignoring you. There's a couple of people that say hiya now, but it took them a while to open up. They said something like, what you doing here? It's the community garden, I told them. If you'd like to volunteer you can come in whenever it's open, any day, just come in and do whatever you want. And it's true. New members are welcome. If you want to become part of the resident's group just walk in, sit down, take a meeting and that's it. We'll never turn anybody away.

It's just becoming spring now so the garden's going to start waking up shortly. We have a school coming to do some seeding and a bit of education as well. They've got their own bed in the garden. When the seeds germinate they can plant them and watch them grow. But you know what kids are like, they like things done tomorrow. So we tend to give them plants that grow quickly, like radish. The next thing we've got is the Easter event. We're getting the children to do an egg hunt. Find the plastic egg buried outside and swap it for a real Easter egg. We're going to have a tombola and a raffle, to raise some money to keep the group going. We don't charge a lot, and it'll be free food. And then we're going to have a bit of a plant sale. It won't be expensive. Fifty pence up to a pound per tray of flowers.

Just before Covid we got an award for the garden. A big crystal shield. I think we've had pictures done of it. But I didn't want any fuss. I don't want anybody to give me any awards or anything like that. I just want to be me. The garden isn't the sort of thing you do for recognition. It's the sort of thing you do because you want to do it. I just like to be a volunteer. I like to do things for people. And that's the end of the story. It's giving something back to the community. I don't want any praise. That's not what I do it for. I'm just trying to make a little bit of difference. Seeing people smile, like the young children who come to the garden. They'll plant some seeds, they'll start to grow, and they'll all grin and smile about it. That's the best feeling in the world to have. It might be a little corner of Dukinfield but it's making a difference. If they've made that corner a little bit different, then the world will be a better place.

## I'm Me

There was an event on last June, I seen it advertised on Facebook, so I come with my friend. There was people outside and you had to feed vegetables with hay rattles and my daughter was rocking it and everything. Then we found out about the Craft Café. So I come the week after and I've more or less been ever since.

We've done all sorts. We've made things out of clay, we've done aprons, we've made a big banner that went up for the protests. We've done the big mermaid display on the wall. I like exploring different things like watercolours. And I like making stuff that you can use at home, like bookmarks, plant pots, useful stuff. We had this material and I drew this sunset with the sea, a boat and some birds. We did it with water colour and then we sewed buttons on it, glued little diamonds on. And then we hung them up and that was great. You think wow, did I do that? Because of the watercolours and how it blended and stuff, I felt like an artist. I loved that one. On a Tuesday, as well as the crafts, you've got Pauline Davis, and she does Citizens Advice. So if we're ever stuck for anything, you can always ask her for advice. And there's a kitchen in here as well. Joe has been cooking food on Wednesdays. So yeah, there's always something going on.

What I like as well is, the resources don't get wasted. Whatever we've got we make use of, if there's somebody who needs half a piece of green card, for instance, we'll put the other half away, because somebody else might use it to cut out a leaf or something. Other groups I've been to, they've thrown it away. We've been bringing in egg cartons and jars so we can make stuff through recycling. We did memory jars, bringing in jam jars, coffee jars, and putting in the memories of what makes you feel good. So if you're having a crappy day, you can open it up reach one out, smile and put it back again.

What's great about here is they accommodate for kids, and they love my daughter to bits. She comes on the holidays or when the teachers strike. If we're making something Sam might say, oh your daughter would love that, and makes her a little goodie bag she can do at home. I've said to Joe, in the next two weeks, my daughter's off school, I've got a load of cornflakes at home, so she could make loads of chocolate cornflake cakes. She loves making them, and people could just put an extra 20p or 30p in and then have a dessert at Lunch Club.

I've been going just over a year now. We celebrate birthday with cakes and cards for each other. When people are poorly we do get well cards. Like when Carol was in the car crash at the back of my house. She had to get cut out by firemen and everything. It was quite bad but she only had minor bruises and she was like a walking miracle how she got out of it. I thought it'd be nice to give her some flowers so I did a whip round, a jar people could donate to anonymously, and then I went and got a plant, a colouring book, a candle, and I think there was something else, and then I dropped it round at her house.

Sometimes you can come and you can just sit here and Sam will say, are you okay? And if you want to talk you can go find a little room or cubbyhole or whatever. And if you don't want to talk, that's fine. So it's brilliant. Because everybody's going through loads of stuff. I had a couple of weeks off over Christmas because I'm a carer for my dad, we had a few things going on. But the group don't just turn

around and say oh, you can't come you've not been for two or three weeks. Everyone kept in touch and so did Sam and we all went out together. We went to Fizz's place out of Coronation Street. She's got a little tearoom called Annie's in Manchester next to the theatre. I've also met loads of different people through the Craft Café. We even met Julie Hesmondhalgh off Corrie. She did this big story thing for my daughter and signed it and everything and she was over the moon. My mum was dead jealous because she loved Julie.

Sam makes it dead fun here. She's brilliant. And my daughter loves her to bits. When I told her that Sam won't come around the Easter holidays she went, no! Why? And I spoke about the funding and stuff. But Sam does put things on the WhatsApp group. She talks to us through the week. So it's not just like one session and then you don't hear from her till next time. And obviously she does that out of the goodness of her own heart. It's brilliant. I love it.

Things wouldn't be the same without Sam. I noticed a difference when she hasn't been able to make it. When she's here, everything's flowing. And then when she wasn't it was kind of like standstill. She brings stuff from home so you can't really do what you want to do if she's not here. And she's also just a dead good person, always happy and praising. Oh, you look beautiful today. And the things she comes out with? I don't know what the word is for it. But she makes you feel good about yourself. She picks out the positives all the time. She's unique. You'll never find another Sam. So the Craft Café is such a refreshing space. You can just sit and listen to people talking. You can get advice. It's good for your mental health. And I can get away from my role as a carer and a mum. At the Craft Café I'm not just my mum and dad's daughter, my kid's mum, my dad's carer. I'm me.



## It's Got To Be About Love

I'm hopeless at crafts to be quite honest. But Penny from Cavendish Mill introduced me to the Craft Café, and I kept coming back. It's the sense of community. I care for this lot. And I make them all hug each other now. Because it's got to be about love.

Before the Craft Café, I was involved with the Royal Exchange Elders. Jack from the Exchange took me under his wing. I was there all the time. It didn't matter what we were doing. It could be the opening of a paper bag, I was there but it is difficult for me to get into Manchester now.

The Craft Café is different. They're a great group. I've enjoyed making the fairies and the fairy doors. I'm enjoying this apron too actually. If you're talking about creativity, the Craft Café is a good thing to do on a Tuesday. I've been coming since August of last year, except for when I had a fall. And then I was in a car crash. It's a struggle to get here after the crash, but once I'm here I love it. I'm never sure when I'm doing anything right, unless somebody tells me I'm doing it right. But I just throw myself into it and enjoy it. We've all got our idiosyncrasies. And despite that, or because of that, everybody's so lovable. What they've done here is absolutely amazing. For example, we've done this play which Sheila wrote. She wrote this thing about Dukinfield. It was fun. I'd done acting on zoom with the Exchange over lockdown but acting on stage was a first for me. And then on Thursday, we were at the Royal Exchange. Bill from the Elders was doing a musical, and Helen has written this book of poems, so most of us turned up to read the poetry and perform. So it was quite a week!

When my Jack was a councillor, I also got involved with the Residents' Association. I sent all the letters out so that people would get together. They have meetings here for Dukinfield hub but they start early, and I can't always get there. But they're good because whatever time I turn up they'll summarise the discussion or they'll send me the minutes and I can get involved. There's so much going on there. They've got things for computers. I think that's on a Wednesday morning, which John does. We're talking about doing belly dancing. Imagine that! And we're also talking about crochet, but this will come under the Craft Café. The only time I tried crocheting, it was supposed to be a square and ended up a hat! One fun thing we do is the parties. The next one is Easter. I made an Easter hat a long time ago, so I'll have to do some work on that. They also grow beautiful stuff here. I've never ever in my life had fresh stuff until I came here. The potatoes and the salads are lovely!

Since my Jack passed, I like to go out every day, so all this is a great outlet. But it's harder to do that now I don't have a car. Night times are always the worst. But funnily enough, and the hard thing is, I'm getting used to staying in. I don't want to be this little old lady that stays at home. I'm not that type. But I've got drive. I don't give up. However scared I am, I never give up.

When the crash happened, the car turned over and they had to cut me out. It was 200 yards from home. As he hit me the car started to turn, I thought I was going to spin. So I shut my eyes and waited for it to stop. And the next minute, the car was surrounded and I'm waving to everybody. I was sort of hanging upside down. I thought, don't leave me in here, I'm not dead! There was a lad who was saying, keep talking, keep talking. And I said, I'm fine, honestly. We ended up talking about wine. He liked white and I liked red. This fireman crawled in. I don't know how but he crawled in and put a cushion behind my

head and chatted to me. He protected me from the glass as the cutter cut me out. It was absolutely amazing. And I had quite a following at the hospital. They said, she's 81. And I said, don't keep saying I'm 81, I'm nearly 81! They did all scans and tests and everything came back fine.

And after all this I keep coming back to the Craft Café. It's the ideas. It's like a little community in itself. Everybody needs community, there's too much isolation. And everybody needs people. The people here have adopted me! It doesn't matter if I don't finish what I'm doing. As long as I'm here, that's it. This morning, I told them all I'm going to give them an extra big hug for Mother's Day. I'm the huggy one.

Sam's been bringing me and taking me back the last couple of times because she only goes across the road to Asda. I'm waiting to have my hip done, which is affecting my knee badly, so walking is hard at the moment. But we'll get there. There's light at the end of the tunnel. I'll have my hip done and then I'll be running here!

## Lifesaver

My friend Debbie said to me, do you fancy coming to watch The Glass Menagerie at the Royal Exchange? It was the Tuesday group that was going, and I think they had an extra ticket, or somebody dropped out last minute. It was absolutely brilliant! And then I came on the following Tuesday to have a go at the Craft Café. That was last summer, and now I come every Tuesday.

It's a whole mixture of different personalities. But we've all got that one thing in common, and that's the Craft Café. If you're feeling down, you know who to go to. If you've got a certain sense of humour or joke, you know who's going to get it and who isn't. I know I can pick up the phone to any one of the girls at any time, there's always somebody there for me, whether it's for help, advice, or just for a moan. Sam's like the life and soul of the party. She's so bright, so bubbly. She's just an absolute pleasure to be around. And it doesn't matter what mood you're in when you walk in that door. You know that when you go out, you're going to be smiling. We just click. I can spend all weekend thinking about what I'm going to do on Tuesday.

At the moment I'm sewing a pinny, which represents more than just a pinny, because I'm sewing my grandchildren's names onto it. The activity we did with the play was also a massive experience for me. Even though I was nervous as hell, I absolutely loved it, especially the rehearsals. The Craft Café is not just giving me somewhere to go and someone to talk to, it's widened my whole scope. I look at things and find things interesting that I didn't before. I also like the social side. At Christmas we went and had afternoon tea, and then we went to the theatre. We also put on events. At Christmas and Halloween we had parties and the children came in and did arts and crafts. It takes me like two or three days to recover from an event like that. But it was well worth it.

Outside the café, I volunteer with Finding Rainbows in Ashton. It's a child loss and bereavement charity. My daughter is actually a deputy manager and I've just become a trustee. But I've been volunteering for about four years for them. The main part of it is a project called Up on Angel Wings. People donate white wedding dresses and they're repurposed into funeral gowns for babies. I contact funeral directors, people with wedding dresses, and things like that. Because I've lost two grandchildren, I'm passionate about it. But I don't do the support side because I can't cope with that emotionally. The Craft Café helps balance out this work. It's like yin and yang. Being able to come away from my charity work to the other end of the spectrum, where you can have a giggle and a laugh and you can talk about anything. It balances it out.

I think of the Craft Café as mine. It might sound selfish, but I don't mean it to be. It gets me out of the house. It's not my kids'. It's not my husbands'. It's not the charity's. It's just mine. I've got hold of it with two hands and I'm not letting go. It's my chance to see new friends, have a giggle, and learn new things. And I know it probably sounds very dramatic, but it has actually had a massive effect on my life. My daughter just laughs at me now and she goes, well, you have got a life now mother. But it's true. It might be one day a week. But it's a really important day of the week. This group has been an absolute lifesaver.

Before the Craft Café, I think I was pushing myself backwards to the point where I was probably doing myself harm, mentally. I weren't going out or associating with people. I weren't even phoning people. I was getting to a point where I just cut myself off. My kids were phoning me and saying, you're coming up for a brew or, do you want to go such a place, and I'll say, no, I'm busy. I wasn't busy, I just didn't have the get up and go to do it.

In some ways, I can be shy. And I'm not overly confident in some things. But in other ways, I'll talk to anyone, it doesn't matter who it is. And now I'm getting back to that, which is great. I was in a café the other day with my husband and there was this gentleman already at the table. He said, have these I'll be going in a minute. So we sat down, and we ended up talking about football, because we supported the same team. My husband was looking at me as if to say, what are you doing? But it was great, I was getting back to my old self. It's like with the office. I never used to go into the office unless I was specifically asked for. But now I go once or twice a week. I'll actually get up and go early. It's Tuesdays at the Craft Café that's brought that back out in me. It's amazing. I don't like to think where I'd be without it. I think it's probably saved me from having depression or something along those lines.

It's self-esteem as well, it's that confidence in myself that I'd lost. I don't think I've got it back, I think others have given it me back, because chatting to different people, different backgrounds, different personalities gives you so much. One of the girls today was telling me that she traced one of her family names back to Ireland. We'd been talking weeks ago about ancestry on my dad's side. She was like me, she didn't have a lot of contact with certain areas of the family. So it was a massive thing for her to make this breakthrough. And I remembered a few years back when I'd done it, and how emotional I was about it.

The Craft Café has also made me more inquisitive. Years ago, when I went to uni, I had a family at home, was working part time as well, and I had things I wanted to do but then my health deteriorated. I lost out. I thought deep down, without realising it, that maybe life had come to a bit of a full stop. There wasn't a lot out there from me anymore. But the Craft Café has kicked that idea into touch. Now I'm thinking, what can I do next? What can I see? Where can I go? Who can I meet? Meeting Deborah, for example, was one of the lucky steps I've had. She's the first person I think of when anything happens. I recently found out my daughter is pregnant. And the first thing I wanted to do was phone Debbie and say, Lisa's pregnant! And like I said, Sam's amazing. I don't think we'd have thought of half the things she's come up with. She's so creative that girl, it's scary.

I think this place has a massive effect on people around here as well. It lifts you up, the economy being so chaotic, prices and families having to do without. Kids got to see Father Christmas here, they got a gift, they got an afternoon full of fun. And the parents didn't have the stress of thinking, oh my God, where am I finding money for it? That was really big, because we're giving something to people at a really stressful time. So if we can help people while having fun, it's sharing what we benefit from. I enjoy what I do. And I know without it, I think I'd be lost.

## Mine's A Cheese Sandwich

I moved down here a year ago. A friend posted about the Dukinfield Craft Café group on Facebook. I went on the site and there was Sam saying: Right, I'm getting butties, what does everybody want? And I thought, I haven't even joined yet, but I'm going to join anyway, so I'll be a bit cheeky and go: Hi! I'm new, mine's a cheese sandwich. I haven't looked back since. It's come on leaps and bounds.

My aunt used to paint. I always wanted to paint and draw and stuff. But I was never that good at art. I just wanted to do crafts. In lockdown I was doing pictures for a friend's daughter. She was off school and I had all these stencils. I was doing fairies and trying to do this picture and I thought, this is what I want to do! But at the time, where I lived, nobody was interested. Now, at the Craft Café I've been able to find people with a common interest. You can just be yourself. And we feed off each other. I feel as though that I've made the right move in finding this group. You just end up belonging.

We've done all sorts of stuff. Although I'm slower than an awful lot of people in doing what I want to do, this is all right up my street. I like to help people and listen to their problems. If they're down and depressed, I like to feel as though that I can help them in some sort of way. So I've made an awful lot of friends within this group. It's like a family now.

The group makes you feel more connected. And that's what I wanted to do, connect with people that have got the same interests and the same mindset as you. We're all trying to have a laugh and have fun, whatever you do. What you make doesn't have to be perfect, even though I want it to be absolutely perfect. But we're all self-critical like that. In the end it's about having fun, getting to talk to people about what they're going through, and it's a chance to open up. Because sometimes you can't open up to your family. But you can here, it's a family of friends.

I'm just glad that I ended up finding this group. I've gotten to know everybody. And everybody trusts you without them really knowing who you are. We've only been together for a year and some people will take years and years to decide they fully trust you. But here it's just where everybody's come together. They can talk to you about personal things, you can go to somebody's house and have a cuppa. I wouldn't be without the group now. It's just absolutely brilliant and amazing how everybody's progressed in such a short time.

I think an awful lot of people felt isolated before finding this group. But I get on with everybody. They all make you feel as though you're welcomed in everything. I can say to a friend, fancy going down to the hub? It could be any day of the week, we'll try and do some decorations or catch up on things we haven't finished. It just gets you talking and laughing and you get to have a bit of fun. Two of us were trying to sort out all the cupboards and everything. And it's great that that person can say, hey, do you want to come and give me a hand sorting all this out? Because I'm one where I do like to sort out everything.

During the crafts you're not set on one thing, you can do anything, even though Sam sets out what we're going to do. We can end up thinking or saying to Sam: I can't do that yet. I'll just do my own thing. And she'll go yeah, that's fine. Whatever you want to do. At the moment, we've got about three projects going on in one single day. Sam's all about trying to make it colourful and adding embellishments and

things like that. It's nice to have that colourful choice and different textures. And I think that's what we're learning about now, different textures. Even if you do your work with gel pens, felt pens, and you're working with a bit of material, try to combine and put your whole mind into what you can do.

At the same time, we're only just finding out what we can do. But in another few months it's all going to change again, because we're going to be thinking quite differently and our minds are going to be opened up even more as to what we can do. I'd like to knit and I'd like to learn how to crochet. With the sewing machine that we've got, we can get square pieces of material, sew them together, and make a patchwork picture type of thing. That's where your mind expands because you can just go, wow! It's endless as to what you can end up thinking of. What you can achieve just constantly grows, just like your confidence in people and people's confidence in you.

I'm more involved within the group than I used to be. I'll raise me hand up and everything for anything that needs doing. I try and take on an awful lot. It's giving as much as you can to a great group and to the community. If other people can't make it on that particular day, to help with the garden for instance, I'll give a hand. And it's nice. Today I've been doing these Easter chicks. I thought, what I'm gonna do is try and cut this shape out, stick it on there. It's just so simple, but it creates a different effect. It looks more 3D and bright. That's all we're trying to do, put the colour back in, not just for the hub but for the community.

Here, over time, you expand your mind and your thought. And there's hope. You can't lose sight of hope. Because I always say that if you lose sight of hope, that's it, it's difficult to get that back. You've got to end up trying to give other people hope, when they feel as though they might have lost it. You've got to be positive, happy, even though you might be going through problems yourself. Try and pick other people up, because you do that and then you get picked up a bit yourself. I try and do that every single day. And this group does it as well.

## Open Arms, Open Heart

I'm the tiny cog in this big beautiful community machine. I'm the artist and sort of lead facilitator at the Dukinfield Community Craft Café. We started a whole year ago, with this idea of offering free gentle craft activities to the people that engage with and participate in the building next door, the pantry. It's not a food bank but a food charity, where people can pay £3 and get a really big bag of shopping. We started with gentle crafts and discussions, but it's flourished into so many different things.

I had worked with the Royal Exchange for years, as a theatre maker and facilitator. But I suppose my skill set is craft activities, and I'm good at creating a safe space for people. In my practice as an artist is this idea that art is for everybody. There's so much narrative in our communities that art is for the more affluent. I try to break down that divide. Part of that is done by building people's confidence. It's about nurturing that part of people, so that they feel like art is for them, that they have a right to the arts. When I was told about this opportunity I jumped at the chance. I'd just had a baby and I was trying to find my feet as a mum in the creative industry. And then we had the pandemic, so it put everything on pause. I made an arts pack to go through everyone's doors. I think we made like 500 art packs for everybody on the estate to give them an opportunity to be creative. Once the pandemic got safer, we started the café up again.

As an artist, I would just be really responsive to the group. Someone would express an interest in paper mâché so we'd have a go at paper mâché. We'd make jewellery because someone said they'd like to make jewellery. As it does with any community group, we have the luxury of being together every week. Amazing conversations started to happen over the craft which began to inform the art we made. For example, there was lots of discussion about the menopause, what it is to be a woman over different generations. We would talk about what it is to be a woman now. In response we made self-portraits, some beautiful mosaics, which got hung in the garden as a self-celebration.

This idea of celebrating ourselves was a strong thread through the whole project. It was about giving ourselves space to pat ourselves on the back, when there aren't many natural opportunities like that in society. This place is for cheerleading each other and ourselves. Our conversations carried on to the cost of living crisis. We talked about how there's different forms of activism and how we use our art here as activism. We made a big wall hanging to give to our MP to coincide with the 'Enough is Enough' campaign. We invited him over, he had a chat and fizzy orange juice with us, and he put the wall hanging up in his drop in!

I feel like something really sparked everybody on that day, they kind of realised, oh, we've got agency, our voice matters, we can do things. Very quickly after that we started to make the cookbook, which was to raise funds for all their ideas. And you can still buy that online. We've raised over £500 already, which is over 500 meals for 500 people in Dukinfield.

There's a real welcoming culture across everything that happens in the hub now. It's a very open arms open heart kind of place. The majority of people coming to the caf were looking for friendships and community. That's why we've retained so many people. It's been a safe space and a place where they can access free art activities, which to some people doesn't sound like a lot, but art materials are

expensive. I think that's helped people to give the reins over to me for a few hours. I'll make you a cup of tea, I'll look after you, and you can do your creative activity.

My highlight is watching this group of women discover arts and theatre. Quite a few of the participants have never even been in a theatre before. To all go together and sit together and watch a piece of theatre, to talk about the narrative, the costume, and the lights was amazing. And now they feel like that theatre is their own. We've got participants who were like, I don't draw, I'm not creative. And now they're drawing pictures daily, working in different mediums, and making art every day. So overall, it's just watching all these amazing women flourish, discovering creativity and taking ownership of it.

This group has been so transformative for me as an artist and a mum. I had two babies either side of a pandemic. I was an actor for a really long time. I've always worked as an illustrator, and I've always facilitated. But I really did stumble out of that second maternity leave feeling like, oh, God, what am I going to do in this industry? It's not always kind to parents or carers. What the hell am I supposed to do? But I've found my stride completely in this community arts world. The regularity has helped me. And the combination of these women, these supportive incredible women, has helped guide me to this place I'm in now. It's been life changing. It's given me the chance to find my stride and confidence. Now I'm a community artist and a visual artist. I've found that my work is rooted in people and stories. And that discovery for me as an artist has been huge.

My aspiration for the group is that they just keep flying and doing what they're doing. We've been talking about them exhibiting at the Royal Exchange. There's talk of another stint on stage. And that's all been born out of watching theatre. I also hope to be able to realise a project called 'Capacity to Hold', which is about women's capacity to hold so many incredible things that is not just reproductive. Historically we've been depicted as vessels because of our ability to hold children. But that doesn't define us. I've been so inspired by these women, there's so much more that self-identifying women hold within them and have the capacity to hold. I'd like to realise that project and involve the women in the group to make pots and maybe do some performance.

Around Christmas we did a fairy door hunt. We made all these little fairies for the windows and we said, can you spot the doors? The caretaker, he was like, you put those doors out they're going to get destroyed. And I said, I am going to believe in the goodness of people, and we're putting them out. And they survived! Isn't it an assumption that in a place like Dukinfield, people will just wreck it? Well, they didn't wreck it. The Fairy Doors were just lovely. And the only reason we had to take them in was when they were weathered. They weren't kicked to bits. The community liked it. That speaks a lot to me. It's like the birdhouses. Very early on in the process, we had an event where everybody painted birdhouses. And I still drive around the estate and see the birdhouses in front of people's flats.

There's this idea for the group to bleed out into the community, to create something that will be accessed by people from Dukinfield that don't come to the group or even the centre. That's what the fairy doors and the cookbooks are about. And I know that the cookbook has gone as far as Canada and Portugal. It's this idea of dominoes falling, like wind on grass, that idea of a ripple out.

## To Think I've Come This Far

The Craft Café gives me something to look forward to. I enjoy it more than ever now. If I couldn't come here, I don't know where I'd be. I love it. It's been the best thing in my life, most definitely. You got the art, the cook group, and the garden when it's nice. It's been a lifesaver for me. I started coming with my husband because he does the garden. He kept saying, why don't you join the art and craft café? I didn't know anybody, and I find it hard to trust people because of the way I've been treated in the past. But then one day, it was a bit too warm, and I came in and had a drink and it snowballed from there. Now I come a few days a week. Me and Helen sort things out, tidy the place up. My husband does all the prep work for the food on Wednesday, so I also come in on Wednesday to help him.

The amount of friends I've made here is unreal. I've made friends that are friends forever. Even when we're not here, we're all texting each other, because that's the kind of bond we've all made. How's your day been? How's your week been? I've never known friends like it. It started off with a small group and now it's gotten bigger and better. We do activities on Fridays, like bingo, or games, or quiz day. Everyone can get together and do something. When I come here the time just flies by. You get set into something and before you know it's time to go home. And you feel like you don't want to, you just want to say you could sit here all day and all night.

I've just done an apron, which I thought would have been really hard for me because of my sight. It's with a needle and I can't thread it. Some of it was guesswork, but some of it my friends helped me. I've got butterfly buttons across the top of the pocket with a lot of bows in between. We're all bringing them in, Sam's put a washing line up so we can pin our pinnies up. We all help each other. Like if I get stuck threading a needle, somebody'll help me, they don't moan and bitch about it. Or somebody comes up to me and says, can you draw me a vase? Yeah, sure. Of course. It's not gonna kill me. It's just a kind thing to do. It doesn't cost nowt.

Because of the Craft Café, my outlook on life has changed. I have mental health issues. I've tried taking my life a few times. I've self-harmed, taken overdoses, been in and out of hospital. But it's not been as bad now. I can tell myself, just get over and draw one of your pictures, just do something, because it takes your mind off it. It might take me an hour to do one drawing and my husband will come and say, oh, that's nice. And that's not like him, he doesn't normally say things like that. And I share them when I do them. I did loads on Saturday and Sunday. And then when I'd done them all, I collaged it, put them all together, and then I put them on the WhatsApp group. They all put, good, brilliant, and it gives you a bit of a buzz. It's what makes me happier. It helps me get through the day. And then I've got a week to wait but I'm enthralled in everything that I'm doing right now. There's always something new going on around the corner.

An old lady actually bought a few pictures that I've done. I was showing her them at the bus station in Ashton. They were signed because when she got them she goes, oh, I can tell somebody they were signed by the artist. I'm not an artist, but I thought, that sounds really nice. And she gave me £20. She goes, is that enough to cover your stuff that you use? I said, it's more than enough, you don't even have to pay me. She said, oh no, I've got to pay you. So that's a nice thing, to think that somebody is actually out there and said you're an artist. Even though I know I'm not, it sounds truly amazing.

When you've got depression, it's the fear of the unknown, fear of people you don't know. A new place can feel like you're walking into a lion's den. But when I come to the Craft Café, everybody's giving me hugs. It's full of kittens rather than lions. I can't sleep the night before I come here, I'm that excited. There's a lady that comes called Carol, she's truly amazing. Every time she comes she says, hi hon, hello, where's my hug? And she goes round giving everybody a hug.

The group call me funny bones because we can all be sat there talking, I'm just listening to what somebody's saying, and something will just roll out of my mouth, a song or something a bit naughty. Sam said, you know what, we should call you funny bones. It's nice to know I'm good for something. They call me funny bones but they call me mother as well. And I'm one of the youngest. But there was a lady that comes here, she's had a bit of a bad time, she felt like she was wanting to commit suicide. I took her to one side in the other room over and I said no you don't. I said you've gone through so much and look at you, you're still here fighting. I came back the following week with a trolley full of leaflets from Mind. I said to her, they're self-help, so you don't have to speak to anybody if you don't want to. There's Samaritans as well. I tried to take my life for the first time when I was 11, because of physical and mental abuse and rape. So I know where it's all going and what it's all about. I said to her, if you ever want to talk or you need to get away, you know where I live. You come knock on my door. I couldn't leave her on her own, knowing what she were going through.

Helping other people doesn't make me important or anything like that, but it's nice to know that people can come up and talk to me. I feel like I'm useful. I can relate with other people. I know how far to go and where not to go and where you can go. You've got to listen to them and give them the options. You don't have to suffer in silence here. I learned that one. You don't suffer in silence.

I thought people were horrible in the world. My dad was horrible. Took me two years to tell my mum what he had done to me, the mental and physical abuse. People can be so cruel. But the people here at the Craft Café they're always passing nice, loving, caring comments. No matter what you do. They're not passing judgment. I come in on a Tuesday morning and they'll say, I thought your house was beautiful. Or when I put a picture up of my hair because I had my hair done. It suits you! And I get all the nice comments about it. It's just it's like one big, giant family that are all loving and caring towards each other.

The Craft Café has put me on the right track and lead me in a better direction. Before all this, I felt like I was going downhill. It was like going underwater, and you're drowning, and you can't get up. But since coming here: onwards and upwards. There's a big world out there. And I think more people who suffer with depression, fear of enclosed spaces, and things like that - you should put your mind to it and try and do something, rather than lock yourself away like I was doing. I never like crowded places. But now I feel like I'm open to going out and smiling more. I love them all at the Craft Café. Your arms grow grow every time you come, and they extend further and further afield, because there's just that many nice people. To think I've come this far. My life is actually worth living.

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**OLD FIRE  
STATION**

**Written by Sarah Cassidy,  
Old Fire Station, Oxford, June 23**

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