



2006-2007
*Improving Housing Services
by Involving Tenants*



Case study: Housing Percent for Art - The Boardman Street Library of Unwritten Books

Beacon theme: Improving housing services by involving tenants
Authority name: Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council
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Summary

The Boardman Street Library of Unwritten Books was a Housing Percent for Art scheme aimed at developing communities through art. The project used art as a tool for engaging residents, capacity building and community cohesion.

Background

Housing Percent for Art is a service located within Bolton at Home, the arms length management organisation that manages the Council's housing stock. The team work with communities to maximise the benefits of regeneration, facilitated by Housing Percent for Art, also serves Bolton Community Homes, an umbrella partnership of nine housing associations working in the borough.

The scheme objectives are to:

- help improve the physical and social fabrics of communities
- provide opportunities for local employment
- encourage closer links between artists, residents and the professionals that shape the environment
- work in partnership to develop borough-wide arts and culture projects

Projects can involve a diverse range of arts activities, such as environmental art, public art, video, drama, dance, photography, digital art and others as appropriate, but the projects fall broadly into four categories:

- consultation
- personal and group development
- capacity building
- physical and environmental art

Boardman Street

The Boardman Street Estate is a small area comprising around a hundred Bolton at Home (formerly council) properties and right-to-buys. Individuals from the Boardman Street Estate approached the Blackburn Road Neighbourhood Panel and in turn Housing Percent for Art to develop an arts project that would bring the community together, engage residents in a consultation process and identify residents who would like to work on future projects for the area. This would be the first community development work ever undertaken on the estate.



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Key issues/problems

The houses were built in the 1970s, and the estate includes a number of pedestrian closes and dark walkways which are fairly neglected. It sits between two busy radial routes into the town centre, but there are no facilities (i.e. shops, leisure) within the estate itself and so opportunities for residents to interact are limited. There is no residents association or community action group, although individual residents have expressed an interest in improving their area. The population is diverse in terms of ages and ethnicity, unfortunately this contributes to the feeling that this is a fragmented community.

What we did

A panel, which included residents, Housing Officers and the Housing Percent for Art team, commissioned artists Caroline Jupp and Sam Brown to bring their project 'The Library of Unwritten Books' to Boardman Street.

The Library of Unwritten Books is a unique national initiative to create a collection of 'imaginary' books. This library is made possible by interviewing people about the book they would like to write or make. The interviews are recorded and transcribed with minimal editing to retain the voice and words of the author. The transcripts are then printed as mini-books, which are no more than 1,000 words, and simply bound with an embossed card cover.

All the residents of the Boardman Street Estate and the surrounding area were invited to take part in the project. The sessions took place over a two week period which included the school holidays to encourage people to get involved. Recording took place in the nearby Cobden Community Centre, in the park, on the street and in resident's homes.

The artists also held a 'Reminiscence Day'. They used material from the 1930s Work Town project, as well as old photographs and news cuttings the residents had brought along, to prompt the discussion. Participants then had an opportunity to record their recollections as an 'unwritten book'

The project ended with a celebratory event to which all the authors were invited and received a copy of their book. The Boardman Street Library of Unwritten Books is currently touring the borough.

Key outcomes

Twenty five local residents recorded stories for the Library, and the artists engaged with over a hundred people in conversations in the street and in their homes. Participants represented a variety of ethnic backgrounds and ranged in age from three to 70 years old.

Participants commented on the sense of achievement when they were presented with their book. They also commented on the project providing an opportunity to get to know their neighbours for the first time and, perhaps most importantly, about how much they enjoyed being involved.

Through the Library of Unwritten Books project, we were able to meaningfully engage with over 100 residents, many of whom have expressed an interest in being involved in further projects to improve their area. It is hoped that this new enthusiasm and the relationships formed through the project will eventually lead to the formation of a new community action group.

Resources

The total cost of the project was £4000. The project took place over a period of 3 months, ending in January 2006.



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Who was involved?

Officers from Housing Percent for Art team and the Customer Involvement team took the lead on the project supported by members of the Blackburn Road neighbourhood panel.

Barriers and how were they overcome

The major barrier faced in setting up this project was the difficulty in accessing residents on a meaningful level and persuading them to take that first step towards community involvement. This barrier was overcome by the groundwork put in by the artists during the early stages of the scheme. They spent a number of days simply walking the streets of the estate and introducing themselves to the people they met, establishing relationships that they could then build on.

Critical success factors

The critical success factor was the artists' ability to engage with residents, to earn their trust and to build their confidence to the point where they were able to share their stories. Also critical to the success of this project was the continued enthusiasm of the neighbourhood panel and the officers involved.

How would we do it better?

If we were to run the project again we would factor in a longer time for the collection of stories. The artists found that with each day they spent on the estate, more people were coming forward to record their books. They felt the 'word of mouth' effect would have been even more powerful if we had extended the project by another few weeks.

Key contact

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