

## **Sensory Journeys Symposium**

**Wednesday 10<sup>th</sup> January 2018**

**14:00 – 17:00**

### **Attenborough Arts Centre**

Michaela Butter MBE, Director, Attenborough Arts Centre

Welcome everyone. I am so delighted to be at this event to celebrate this amazing project with you all. Our partnership with the Paul Hamlyn Foundation enabled us to find new ways to work with schools, to take creative risks and experiment with ways to engage young people in the very best of contemporary art whilst gaining direct experience of working with artists. This project has been a true partnership based on trust and with a shared vision to enhance the lives of disabled children so thank you all, that have been on this journey with us.

I was asked to provide a little bit of context before we move onto the main speakers. So, it is just 20 years ago since the Attenborough Arts Centre opened its doors for the first time in the presence of our Patron Lord Richard Attenborough and the Princess of Wales. The Attenborough family remain very closely connected to our work, with Richard's son the theatre director, Michael Attenborough now acting as our Patron and David Attenborough taking an active interest in all that we do. The venue, at the time, represented a unique and ground breaking design concept, a purpose built centre founded to meet Lord Attenborough's vision of widening access to the arts – where physical and psychological barriers would be actively removed so the arts would be open to all. Even today it is one of only 5 purpose built arts spaces across the country, so remains a very special resource both locally and nationally.

This is where it gets a little bit complicated because I've got some flashy sort of bits so I'm just going to put them up because otherwise I'll be to-ing and fro-ing.

So, what do we do? So, the AAC is funded by Arts Council England and the University of Leicester who recognise our value in creating a bridge between the University and wider local communities, linked to their community engagement commitments. Our initial focus

was on providing opportunities for people to participate in practical courses and workshops, but over the last few years we have expanded to an all year-round programme of public events with a focus on music, theatre, dance, comedy and children's events as well as offering social and retail opportunities through our café and venue hire.

Two years ago we were able to open our splendid gallery spaces providing the largest contemporary art gallery in Leicester and one of the largest in the East Midlands area, after a successful fund raising campaign that saw 1,000 people help us meet our target of one and half million. Our galleries are dedicated to the exhibition of contemporary British and international art that references socially engaged practice, as well as increasingly being used, as we've seen today, to celebrate our school partnerships and young curator scheme – Next.Gen Creatives. We've seen a year on year increase in our visitor figures and last year welcomed a record 118,000 through our doors.

So why this project in Leicester? And why at the Attenborough Arts Centre? Well, as some of you might know, Leicester is the most culturally diverse city in the UK, according to the 2011 census. But despite this, the local picture is challenging: Leicester is ranked 25th worst out of 326 local authorities in the social deprivation indices, with 41% of the population living in the most deprived areas and with over 33% of children living in poverty (Leicester Joint Strategic Needs Assessment, 2012). Leicester is in the lowest 20% of culturally engaged areas in England and is ranked the 9th lowest for engagement with the arts, according Arts Council England statistics.

The Arts Council has recognised these challenges and has supported the cultural sector by creating bridge organisations, such as Leicester based The Mighty Creatives, to create connections to the education sector. They have also championed Arts Mark and Arts Award to encourage schools to recognise the potential of the arts in delivering not only within wider curriculum agendas but also in building confidence and transferable skills for pupils. Their latest initiative has established Cultural Education Partnerships across the country designed to foster dialogue and engagement between schools. And in Leicester this is represented by The City Classroom project - and in fact we have Adele here from Spark, who chairs that project, and we are one of the venues - and this is enabling more local people to engage with high quality culture in their local area. We believe we are

uniquely positioned to support this work because of the nature of our building and the range of skills and passions of my staff.

So, leading me on very fittingly to talk about the work, our outreach and work with children and young people. When we became an Arts Council England client in 2012 we embarked on a new learning and outreach programme, working with children, young people, schools and families for the first time, with a focus on increasing access for children with disabilities. My team have done an amazing job in building links to schools and families, pioneering new approaches to engagement and championing inclusive practice. We now run weekly, free, family focussed workshops as well as targeted activities for families with children with complex needs, supported by Arts Council England and the BBC Children In Need fund. In 2017 we were delighted to be awarded one of the highest percentage uplifts, and for our funding with the Arts Council, that will run for four years from April 2018, through which we hope to expand our offer to children and young people.

I would like to take this moment to thank the Paul Hamlyn Foundation in agreeing to fund this project, the wonderful artists and schools who agreed to go on this journey with us and my fantastic Education and Outreach team. Marianne Pape, our Education and Outreach Officer, who came up with the concept originally, and applied to the Paul Hamlyn Foundation; our two incredible Schools Programme Coordinators, Lisa Jacques and Manya Benenson, who led on this project; and the rest of our learning team who have supported the journey: Hannah Pillai and Louise Kay.

Thank you very much, and thank you all.

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