

OPEN SESAME

Unlocking creativity in early years
2010–2016

Key Findings



WHAT IS OPEN SESAME?

Open Sesame has changed creative practice for under 5s in nurseries, Children's Centres, galleries and museums by stimulating new thinking and new partnerships between artists, early years practitioners and cultural partners across Sussex and Surrey. Open Sesame ran from 2010 to 2016 in three consecutive programmes.

HOW IT WORKED

Collaboration and partnership have been central to Open Sesame.

Artists, working together as Octopus Inc, early years practitioners and partner organisations have all collaborated through Open Sesame projects to support children's creative learning, with leadership from Culture Shift.

This has included opening up museums and galleries to the very youngest children; giving early years practitioners the opportunity to explore their own creativity; training more artists to work with under 5s; and inviting parents and children into stimulating creative environments to play together.

By bringing people together to share their skills and explore their creativity, Open Sesame has developed the confidence of artists and early years practitioners to let children lead, to support their exploration, and to give them magical and stimulating experiences that help them to learn and develop.



ARTISTS AND CULTURAL SECTOR ORGANISATIONS

Artists created participatory shows for parents and children to explore together, led creative practice sessions for participants, acted as mentors to 'trainee' artists and staff from creative and cultural organisations, and shared their practice more widely at conferences and training sessions. Theatres, museums, galleries and libraries acted as partners, hosts and participants.

'The project opened doors and gave me the tools to find my true vocation. I don't think there was a single child or adult involved in this project who did not learn and benefit from it.' Trainee artist



EARLY YEARS PRACTITIONERS AND PARTNERS

Practitioners from nursery settings and Children's Centres across Sussex and Surrey paired with artists in phase 1 and phase 2 and with cultural organisations in phase 3, and had the opportunity to accredit their learning through a Level 4 module designed and delivered by University of Brighton.

'I enjoyed the session and was reminded of how much fun it could be to cast aside our 'sensible' ideas and preconceptions and throw ourselves into having fun, getting messy and clearing away afterwards.' Early years practitioner, phase 3



PARENTS, CARERS AND CHILDREN

Through partnerships, Open Sesame created new opportunities for children and their parents and carers to engage with creativity and the arts sector, including families who were new to participating in the arts.

'Thank you for such a fun morning! We really enjoyed visiting the gallery – a first for me. Staff were welcoming, friendly and very helpful. We really liked the different materials to explore. It was nice to feel comfortable in the gallery singing with my daughter. We would like to come (again) soon!' Parent



Aspects of the work		Key Impacts		Implications for practice	
Open Sesame 1: 2010–11					
Approach	Focus	Exploring how skills-sharing between artists and early years practitioners can have a positive impact on children's creative development and the early years setting.	Artists and ET practitioners agreed the project was a brilliant opportunity for gaining confidence in working creatively with very young children and sharing practice.	Confidence-building was the key factor affecting early years practitioners' ability to engage with and promote creative opportunities for children in settings. Working with artists created the potential for 'having a go'.	
Context	Funding and partnerships	Funded through Creative Partnerships using an enquiry-led approach, with support from West Sussex County Council's Early Childhood Service and Arts Service and cultural partners.	Partnerships enabled effective cross-professional working and created opportunities for early years practitioners, settings and wider family and community to make contact with the creative and cultural sector.	Strong relationships between early years and cultural partners were built during this project and continued into the next two Open Sesame projects.	
	Location and timescale	Across West Sussex over eight months alternating between 'masterclasses' and artists and early years practitioners working together in nursery settings. At the end of the project there were endings which were either events to share the project with parents or training sessions for staff.	Travel was a challenge, as was committing time away from settings. Some projects involved parents and carers by promoting creative use of simple materials/ideas at home.	Local hubs to support creative work in early years settings could improve access in the future: travel costs for artists can be prohibitive for seasonal work.	
People	Artists, early years settings and partners	8 artists and 8 early years practitioners from nursery settings in West Sussex were paired up for the project.	Artists going into the settings, on-going relationships and the creation of a community of learning that supported experiential learning: a playful pedagogy.	Practitioners would benefit from reflection on experiential learning through structured sessions at a University or college outside the masterclass sessions to make deeper links with day-to-day practice in settings.	
Open Sesame 2: 2012–13					
Approach	Focus	Developing the idea of collaboration between artists, the cultural sector and early years settings, and introducing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a new accredited creative training route for early years practitioners • professional development opportunity for early career artists • a participatory creative event for young audiences and their families. 	ET practitioners' learning supported through Level 4 module designed and delivered by University of Brighton. Early career artists accredited learning through Gold Arts Award, 16 performances of the creative event, <i>Sortez!</i> – 500+ children, parents, carers and staff participating. Audience feedback overwhelmingly positive.	ET settings increased confidence in letting children lead and improved creative skills and confidence through working with artists. Trainers improved confidence in working with under 5s and benefited from the skills and knowledge of ET practitioners. As a result of <i>Sortez!</i> parents felt inspired to explore creative play with their children.	
Context	Funding and partnerships	West Sussex County Council Childhood Service bid to Arts Council England on behalf of an expanded partnership that now included early years and arts services in Surrey and East Sussex, artist and cultural partners and the University of Brighton.	Open Sesame provided impetus for Creative Sparks, a joint venture between Arts Partnership Surrey and Surrey's Early Years and Children's Service, supporting effective learning by embedding creativity in nursery settings.	Involvement of key stakeholders in each county proved valuable for cross-authority networking. Positive relationships developed between partners, especially in Surrey, leading to the establishment of a further project employing locally based artists and a hub model.	
	Location and timescale	October 2012 – September 2013, 13 settings across West Sussex, East Sussex and Surrey took part, with early years partners targeting the project primarily at disadvantaged areas. Group sessions took place in Brighton, Chichester and Horsham.	Travel again a challenge, especially over long distances in rural areas during a snowy winter to attend creative practice sessions and the university course.	Local hubs using high quality local artists and cultural organisations could overcome the travel issue.	
People	Artists, early years settings and partners	A mixture of managers and practitioners took the lead in each early years setting and were each partnered with a trainee artist and supported by a lead artist.	Reflective practice supported by the university course and Gold Arts Award. Participants reflected on project sessions, keeping journals and recording planning and outcomes. On-going relationships between lead artists, trainees, project managers and tutors provided a range of options for support.	The balance of support, challenge and reflection led to shifts in thinking and changed or expanded practice. Greatest impacts were where settings cascaded the learning to their staff team and where managers led a change to the ethos of their settings.	
	Artists from previous project formed Octopus Inc and became the lead artists, acting as mentors for 7 trainee artists, leading creative practice sessions and devising and presenting the creative event.	Lead artists developed as a group and extended their practice and experience as mentors and trainers, as well as devising an original creative event aimed at engaging parents and carers in creative play.	Trainee and lead artists developed artform skills and confidence working with under 5s. Lead artist team continue to use their skills as creative trainers and facilitators running sessions with organisations across the region.		
Open Sesame 3: 2014–16					
Approach	Focus	Focus on 0–2s and developing practice in the cultural sector. Creative programme of professional development for cultural organisations, early years practitioners, and families.	Partnerships between Children's Centres and cultural organisations led to changes in practice and new opportunities for participation. Training sessions with libraries and museums disseminated practice to a wider audience.	Opportunities for parents and children to participate were central with the focus on 0–2s and parents rather than day-care settings.	
Context	Funding and partnerships	East Sussex County Council Children's Services worked in partnership with cultural organisations with funding from Arts Council England. University of Brighton led the Level 4 module. New partnership with Plymouth University also established.	Major re-structure of Children's Centres in 12 had significant impact on partnerships. Open Sesame informed Plymouth University's research into the attributes needed by the early years workforce in working with 0–2s.	Despite incorporating learning from previous years, it was hard to fully mitigate the impact of the changes to the Early Years service.	
	Location and timescale	East Sussex, starting in early 2014 and ending in November 2016. Training sessions for libraries and museums took place across Sussex and also in the South-West.	Children's Centres in areas of deprivation in East Sussex chosen to partner with cultural organisations, to mitigate the issues with travel, the university module was delivered in Hastings.	The smaller county area meant that creative practice sessions could take place in cultural venues, adding another dimension to the project.	
People	Artists, early years settings and partners	2 cohorts of staff, artists and volunteers took part, following the programme of creative practice sessions and the Level 4 module.	Work brought about changes to the practices of even highly experienced ET practitioners. Cultural partners were less experienced with very young children but gained confidence, developing new participation offers for families.	Partnerships continued to thrive, but reductions in staffing at Children's Centres threatens sustainability. Programming for under 5s in cultural organisations continues in some places.	
	Octopus Inc delivered participatory performance for 0–2s, continuing their role as lead artists and mentors and leading creative practice sessions.	A new piece of work, <i>Inside, Outside, Upside Down</i> , was developed through the project and used in training sessions with museums and libraries.	The varied role of lead artists as trainers, mentors, facilitators and creative practitioners has enabled the dissemination of the project work in a variety of contexts.		

OUTCOMES

Open Sesame has:

- ✿ trained staff and volunteers from nurseries, Children's Centres and cultural organisations in creative practice that is used in day-to-day activities with under fives
- ✿ accredited the learning of 30 people in the project through a Level 4 module designed and delivered in partnership with University of Brighton
- ✿ provided a catalyst for new partnerships between local authority services in Surrey that have increased opportunities for creative training in the early years and arts sectors
- ✿ built new partnerships in East Sussex between early years and cultural sector organisations
- ✿ developed the expertise of the core team of lead artists and provided introductory training for artists new to working with under 5s
- ✿ created three new participatory experiences that have engaged parents and children and equipped them with ideas for creative play at home
- ✿ supported the development of new participatory programming in cultural organisations.

Open Sesame has established a way of working that has led to transformational effects on individuals and organisations that have taken part.

In longer term follow up with artists and early years practitioners from the first two programmes, 90% of respondents said they would recommend the Open Sesame approach.

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