

# 'Home'

An Arts Project in Ashford, Kent

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Picture Anna Ray 2018

This report sets out to describe the 'Home' project and to be a guide for any future agencies wanting to run a project with similar aims to 'Home'.

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# ‘Home’: An arts project in Ashford, Kent

## *Introduction*

‘Home’<sup>1</sup> is an arts project that brought together newly-arrived Syrian mothers with mothers, their families and the wider community who are long-term residents of Ashford, Kent. The project, running between May and November 2018, was a partnership between Ashford Borough Council (ABC), the Diocese of Canterbury (DoC) and arts charity People United (PU). It was funded by a grant from the Arts Council.

The project set out to explore the universal but highly personal theme of home. It asked questions such as what makes a place a home? How do women feel about and depict the home-making process? The organisers hoped participants would share their stories across borders and commonalities and in sharing these often unheard stories, would overcome language and cultural barriers. The goal was to encourage a sense of belonging for both refugee and local women and support social cohesion through artistic and human connections.

This report<sup>2</sup> sets out to describe the ‘Home’ project and to be a guide for any future agencies wanting to run a project with similar aims to ‘Home’. Such projects could, like ‘Home’, bring together refugees and long-standing residents to build community cohesion and better integration but equally could bring together any groups who are isolated or rarely mix with people outside their community. The success of ‘Home’ depended on the atmosphere of trust and openness that developed within the group. This allowed the participants to relax in the group and to explore ideas in a safe and comfortable environment. It was very important in the ‘Home’ project that all the participants were women, this may or may not apply to other projects.

The project partners, ABC, DoC and PU brought a range of skills. ABC are the lead agency for supporting resettled Syrian refugees in Ashford and the DoC has experience supporting refugees and communities in the area as well as its long-standing connections to faith and community

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Home’, rather than home will be used to indicate the project rather than the broader concept.

<sup>2</sup> This report was written by Dr Lucy Williams, an independent researcher. It was written in collaboration with the participants of the ‘Home’ project and draws on interviews and observations. All views expressed here are the authors.

groups. PU has long-standing experience of running artist-led projects that aim to inspire kindness, community and social change.

### *The background to the Project*

Since David Cameron's announcement in 2015 that the Syrian vulnerable person resettlement programme<sup>3</sup> (VPR) would be expanded to resettle 20,000 Syrians in need of protection, ABC has been at the forefront of resettlement initiatives. Not only has ABC taken a large number of families but it has invested in providing a high level of support to the families through dedicated ABC staff members. This experience highlighted a need for projects that would encourage Syrians and in particular Syrian women, to engage with the local community and to take part in projects that would encourage them to meet local people and feel part of the community.

The Project developed from an idea from DoC to use art as a way of bringing women recently arrived in Ashford together with long-term residents of Ashford. The aim was to promote the Syrian women's sense of belonging to their new home but significantly, it aimed to generate a wider understanding between long-term residents of Ashford and the new arrivals. The hope was that women would develop relationships that would continue beyond the project and which would create a greater awareness of the concept of home and of what a shared and welcoming home can be. The application to the Arts Council stated that "We want to achieve a sense of belonging for both refugee and local women involved, and grow social cohesion through artistic and human connections". It recognised from the start that it was not just newly arrived refugees who stood to gain from a greater sense of belonging.

### *The themes emerging from the project*

The project set out "exploring the theme of home and recognising each woman's unique perspective while reinforcing the universally shared need to feel at home wherever we are."<sup>4</sup> It sought to "... explore what makes a place a home and how women feel about and depict the home-making process. We want participants to share their stories across borders and commonalities. We believe the visual arts are a powerful

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/syrian-vulnerable-person-resettlement-programme-fact-sheet>

<sup>4</sup> Extract from the funding application

way to share these often unheard stories, overcoming language and cultural barriers.”<sup>5</sup> This theme is a universal and broad one that was handled lightly throughout. Homes in the past, present and future were reflected on as were the homes we carry with us and the people who make us feel at home.

***“The beauty of the project was that it was not a ‘refugee’ project.”***

The above is an important quotation from one of the partner organisations. Unlike many projects involving refugees, the immigration status of the participants was not an important feature of this project. Projects involving refugees are bound to be affected by public preconceptions and media representations of refugees as a group ‘in need’ who simultaneously victims are seeking safety and outsiders who may not be trustworthy and are potentially a threat. Engaging with refugees for many people is a political act and while this kind of attitude was exactly the kind of objectification this project was designed to challenge, it cannot be ignored. The Syrian refugees, by definition, have suffered and have lost their homes and much else besides. Through the project however, we learned that all of the women in the group were facing challenges of many sorts. These challenges included loss and bereavement, illness and the challenges of everyday life in domestic and work settings. The project consciously didn’t pry into the personal lives of the participants, but left it open for the participants to share should they wish to. Many women did choose to share and some expressed a sense of feeling supported should they wish to share more. Of course the refugee status of the Syrian participants, with all that that entails, cannot be ignored but it was not the paramount consideration. Indeed, some of the long-term residents showed themselves to be vulnerable and were eager to explore difficult situations and relationships brought out by the concept of home and home-making.

***“We felt that the theme should be handled lightly, it is not necessary to create an exhaustive interpretation of home and from my experience it will be more fruitful and meaningful to allow people to respond bit by bit with their own ideas, memories and interpretations as they bubble up to the surface.”***

Through the progress of the project, participants above all built and shared friendships and connections and at the least extended their

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

social network in Ashford. Together we explored the emotional impact of talking about home and considered the places, things and people that contribute to ideas of home. Home was recognised as a place of safety but also sometimes of struggle perhaps due to the demands of mothering and domestic obligations. Home was recognised as a place that changes and that can be lost and found.

### *The Partnership and Roles in the Management of the Project*

The project was built on a partnership between Ashford Borough Council (ABC), the Diocese of Canterbury (DoC) and People United (PU). Their enthusiasm and commitment was key to the successful running of the project. The willingness and energy of the representatives of these organisations set the tone for the workshops and this report will look more closely at their roles to draw lessons for other organisation seeking to run a similar project. This strong partnership brought together different skills and expertise and was crucial to the success of the project.

The partnership was marked by clear and shared objectives, a willingness to work collectively to solve problems and a flexible approach to challenges that came up along the way.

The involvement of staff from **ABC** was very important especially in relation to supporting the participation of the Syrian women. Not only are they the primary agency working with Syrian women in Ashford but they have built trusting relationships with the Syrian families. Their backing of the project and the encouragement of the interpreters they provided, gave the project local credibility. The ABC-provided interpreters and support staff were extremely flexible and committed to the project despite having very full caseloads managing the resettlement project as a whole. Importantly the ABC staffs were able to make it clear to potential participants that they were not obliged to attend; that it was their choice. It is testament to their success and dedication to this role that Syrian women who had only recently arrived in the UK joined in the project right up to final sessions and the exhibition. Without ABC's active promotion and sensitive encouragement of the project, the Syrian women might not have come or continued to be involved.

The **DoC's** Refugee Project Officer works developing community cohesion and in promoting long-term and meaningful responses to the



issues affecting refugees and migrants in the Diocese's area. Her contribution to the project was as the originator of the project and fundraiser. She was to a large extent the 'heart' of the project. She is well known and trusted by the Syrian women and she brought the project to life. Her presence contributed hugely to the atmosphere and to the levels of trust within the group. DoC contacts in schools and local churches were also important in publicising the project amongst women who have lived for many years in Ashford.

**PU** has longstanding expertise in running projects that use the arts to "... explore how the arts can inspire kindness, community and social change"<sup>6</sup>. Their way of working, reputation and experience was crucial in the artist commissioning process. PU were able to ensure the artistic quality of the work and have expertise in commissioning artists to work in innovative ways with community groups. The commissioned artist led workshops and brought the art produced by the women together into an original and stunning installation of textile art, including a series of sixty editions and a film. She was supported by PU staff throughout the process administratively and creatively and had access to a PU Mentor who helped her think through the ongoing challenges of the commission. PU also played an essential role in the running of the workshops, setting up the spaces, arranging the logistics of the timetables, holding the paperwork, ensuring, for example, that consent forms were signed and in order. The PU staff also played an important role arranging and preparing for the public events that were part of the project – the Create open workshop and the final exhibition. In addition, they took a role in looking beyond this project to make connections with other PU commissions and the wider art and community development world. The PU volunteers who assisted at workshops were similarly flexible and fitted unobtrusively into the project supporting the artist in many ways including entertaining children, clearing up, making tea and coffee or simply chatting with the participants and making them feel at home.

Participants worked with a **visual artist** known for her textile work. She was recruited through People United's Artist Commission 2018 programme, by the partners and participants, following an open call and interview process. Various themes relating to ideas of home, including rituals and celebrations, people and places, the colours of home, were used to lead 17 workshops and a community art event (part the Create

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<sup>6</sup> People United (2017:2) "Changing the World through Arts and Kindness: Evidence from People United projects 2007-2017

Festival in Ashford). Different skills and techniques were also used to encourage the participants to work together including stamps, collage, appliqué and felt making. In these workshops, the participants built up a vast number of motifs, images and patterns which became part of the artistic response to the workshops.

The work that came out of the project was both individual and collective. Individual in the sense that all the participants contributed their own motifs and collective as this imagery was brought together in the final artwork by the artist. In the studio, the artist selected motifs from the artwork and these were edited and arranged to create a series of repeat prints. Each design was printed onto textiles; these fabrics later formed part of the final installation, a triptych and series of editions produced by the artist. Once part of the final piece, none of these individual motifs and designs belonged to any one participant but became part of a collaborative work. As the final event of the project, an exhibition was put on in Ashford where the work and information about the project was shown to the public. A large number of participants, their families, friends and supporters of the project came to celebrate and for a chance to show the work to guests, to meet up and, for some, to discuss future plans.

The artist saw her role as both creative artist and as workshop 'leader'. Her aim was to "surprise the participants" and also to reflect the images and work they produced during the workshops back to them in surprising and interesting ways.

This partnership was greatly supported by the **training centre** who provided space for the workshops and who, significantly, supported the project by encouraging attendance and by incorporating elements of the project into the classes for language and skill learners. Staff at the training centre played a crucial, but informal role in the partnership as they allowed the project to use their space and one teacher gave up her teaching room for the Thursday workshops and cleared out the storeroom to creating storage space and a refreshment area over one weekend.

The room the workshops were held in was not an immediately ideal space – having only artificial light, poor ventilation in the summer and low ceilings. It was only after the staff at the training centre voluntarily cleared a room that there was space for the artist to leave equipment, supplies, pieces of work and importantly, to make tea and coffee. It was



a very versatile space however, with a play area for the children, a toilet and a small sitting area. The physical limitations of the space were entirely offset by the positive association the venue had for the Syrian participants. They knew it well; they trusted the staff and felt at home there. The fact the Syrian community knew the centre and used it regularly was far more important than its physical limitations as PU had anticipated in the planning phase.

The **participants** themselves played a huge role in shaping the project. As individuals they brought skills and insights to the project which they shared and developed through the workshops. Importantly they brought enthusiasm and a willingness to engage with difficult topics and themes. The Syrian women probably came with less expectation than the local women who at times, seemed a little unsure of their position in the project. They were self-conscious and careful not to offend the Syrian women who just got on with it from the start and seemed to take the whole thing in their stride. As the workshops progressed the participants found their place and settled down, building relationships and confidence. Different attitudes to working together emerged with some women preferring more free expression and others enjoying having a clear task but all of the women were there because they wanted to be and the sense of fun and enjoyment was palpable.

Some of the long-term Ashford residents came specifically because they wanted to work with the artist. They were surprised and delighted to meet the others in the group. Some came because they wanted to meet the Syrian women and were interested in cross-cultural encounters, in learning about other people's lives, in learning languages. For others it was the theme of 'Home' that attracted them: "The purpose means a lot to me". Others came because their friends had got involved or because they had heard about the project through the Ashford school that helped the partnership with recruitment. Some knew of People United before this project.

Both the art project and the social project were important – it was about learning skills – and working together. One participant remarked that art is 'so therapeutic' – that there is "...always something going on beneath the surface: Art allows people to work things through collective and individually". As for the motivations of the Syrian women, some first asked if they were obliged to attend and were pleased it was up to them to come along or not. One Syrian woman told me that some of the other women she knew laughed at her for going to the group but she didn't

care – it was a chance for her to get to know people, to learn more and have a new experience.

During the project, and especially at the final exhibition and the public workshop during the Create Festival, the partnership was supported by the Culture department of Ashford Borough Council. Park Mall and County Square in Ashford town centre were important in facilitating access to space for both of these events and were supportive in helping prepare for both events. Their support was typical of the generosity towards the project offered by many individuals and organisations in Ashford. For example: the florist who donated a flower arrangement, students of the Art College who painted the walls of the exhibition space and a carpenter delivering materials for the exhibition who built the base to display the final work on.

### ***What we did: Themes arising from the Project***

In the artist's exploration of the themes 'Home' engaged with, she encouraged a mixing of the past and the future of home. Allowing participants to explore their feelings about home was very powerful – as one participant noted the project encouraged her to reflect back on a past home and she said "it hit me!"

***"I totally loved the concept of bringing together mums because of everything you have that in common and love connects us all. This was nice how that then related to the finished piece with the use of heart. I love how now the Syrian ladies stop in the street to talk to me and I see them around town every day."***

***"Reflecting on friendships made during the project: I am determined to follow this through. After all, building friendship, fostering kindness is what we intended to do. It's a privilege to have met the Syrian women and spent time with you all."***

Building **friendships and connections** was the bedrock of the project and getting to know one another in the safe and creative space of the workshop was reported as having a very powerful effect. The commonality of motherhood and womanhood was important and even if the majority of participants do not become firm friends, they became known to each other and reported that they greet each other in the street. This is significant and a marker of the success of the project.

The project has been life changing for many of the participants and it has allowed them to reassess their own thoughts about home and friendship and certainly, open them up to new experiences.

For some, the chance to get out and meet new people was revelatory leaving them with an ambition to keep up the relationships made and to extend their new learning.

***“It was good for practising English”***

***“I enjoyed the socialising, the drawing, the whole thing!”***

***“I really enjoyed it – at first there were not so many English ladies but now lots of English ladies – it’s fun!”***

***“She made Arabic coffee for me and it was something I’ve never ever tried before! It is strong, aromatic and comes in a small cup like an espresso - I looked it up afterwards and I believe it contains cardamom which would explain the lovely aroma. We communicated using Google translate and she said she’d like to sit with me to learn English, I said of course and we will learn from each other.”***

The project understood the **emotional impact** of the theme of ‘Home’ from the start. It anticipated that feelings of loss, emotional trauma and grief would be raised by this project. These feelings were always there but they were only part of much wider range of emotions which were experienced by many of the participants. The Syrian women I spoke to seemed open to speaking about these emotions and understood that they did not have to share, but could if they wanted to. One Syrian woman said she liked to share her emotions as she felt safe in the group.

She enjoyed the drawing and the talking:

***“I like to share emotions, when I feel ready I will talk. Talking about difficult things is good”***

Throughout the workshops there was an atmosphere of **respect for cultural difference** and in questions of manners and greetings, the participants generally let the Syrian women taking the lead in physical expressions of affection – for example kissing on meeting. After a few weeks, rather stiff greetings between Syrian women and the long-term residents anxious not to offend gave way to more relaxed and easy

hugs. The care taken to negotiate emotions, to respect difference and show cultural sensitivity was important but soon took a more confident and personal tone.

***“And I knew that I just had to give her a hug. I caught her eye with my arms slightly outstretched to ask if I could, she nodded and I gave her a big hug, wishing her well. It was very nice of her to return the following week just to say thank you and goodbye to everyone”.***

Developing an effective way of communication was challenging and creative. For the participants this meant becoming comfortable talking with people they didn't know and one participant commented:

***“I learned some small talk, I have always struggled with that and when language is limited you have to talk in other ways; sharing photos and smiles. I also really enjoyed Syrian bake day!”***

Photos and mementoes became a way of sharing and communicating and pictures and images became a shared language. The artist made a big investment in taking photos of all the participants – for public and private use. Photography was part of her practice anyway but sharing the pictures, conferring with the participants on images and printing up photos to give to the participants was important. She took care to check she had fully informed consent before using any photos in the public work or in publicity but took other pictures purely to give to the participants. These photos, along with the gift everyone received at the end of the project reinforced the 'legacy' of the project extending beyond the series of workshops. The artist drew up an additional consent form to cover different contexts of photograph usage, which was completed by those not wishing to give full consent and was particularly useful for those on the periphery of the project. This enabled the artist to keep images of all the participants on file and distribute specific images within the group as part of the project legacy.

### ***The workshops***

The group was an open one with a free-flow of participants. The freedom to turn up as and when was appreciated by the attendees who had busy lives with families and many commitments. Some participants attended early sessions and then were not seen again for several weeks. New participants joined in right up to the final sessions. It was important that participants didn't feel like they 'had' to be there. This fluidity created

some problems for the artist who had to be flexible with her plans and could not always follow up on themes explored from session to session. Techniques, such as felt-making, were taught early on and then had to be re-taught but this fluidity was dealt with smoothly by the artist who allowed participants who had already picked up skills to take the lead in teaching others.

The workshops started at 10:00, with the artist and support staff from the partnership having already set up the room. The participants arrived between 10:00 and 10:30 and very quickly settled around the tables, chatting comfortably. The artist introduced the theme for the day and explained the techniques to be used. At the end of the session, at 12:00, the artist and support staff had to clear up and put the furniture back to a classroom layout in time for language lessons to restart at 13:00. The whole session from arrival to leaving was intense and busy for the organisers while at the same time they tried hard to generate a relaxed atmosphere for the participants.

Time management was an important and challenging element to the artist's role. The two hours for the workshops flew past as women arrived in ones and twos, took time to greet each other, chat and then settle before the artist could introduce the day's theme and techniques. As she put it "The challenge was to produce some work" and she was aware of trying to balance the need to run an open, participative and enjoyable workshop with the pressure to generate material in order to produce high quality artwork. For example, workshop 13 effectively became a joyous birthday celebration during which the participants shared and danced to their favourite music. As they celebrated, the women rhythmically stamped three long strips of cloth, and the artistic process was actually enhanced by the playful atmosphere and the fact that the women were comfortable with each other.

As well as "managing the chaos", the artist had to manage the emotions of the group which sometimes ran high as difficult subjects were touched upon. There were also occasional personality or artistic clashes and the group had to learn to accept that people have different styles of working. The artist described the importance of reflecting everyone's contributions and this ran through the work from allowing everyone time to explore techniques, styles and ideas to giving everyone involved swatches of the textiles produced as a keepsake at the end of the project.

There were some anxieties about perceived 'rigidity' in teaching style as workshops had planned activities which sometimes restricted the colours participants could use, sometimes insisting that work was shared and completed as a group. The artist's rationale was that as some hadn't had the chance to draw and make art before, structure became an equaliser ensuring that everyone could contribute. Inevitably there were different styles in the group and several of the participants said that they preferred to do their own work and didn't really want others to finish off or add to their work – the artist's approach was a challenge for some. Planning and occasional 'directedness' did not mean inflexibility, however, and especially as the workshops progressed and ways of working within the group developed, shared production and purpose became the norm. Working individually or jointly was a creative challenge but it was generally felt to be a positive thing to work together collaboratively even though it meant relinquishing control of one's work.

***“At first I felt that the lead artist was too prescriptive dictating the use of pre made stencils and specifying the colours that could or could not be used however I came to realise that this often enabled people to overcome any fear of not being able to draw and paint and probably helped them work as a group.”***

The artist had to manage the pace of the activities, the inter-personal dynamics, emotions and relationships within the room. The same group did not attend from week to week and depending on what was happening in the women's lives the group was bigger or smaller. At the start of the project fewer Syrians mothers attended but on some weeks around 15 women were in the room and the workshops were lively. The lead artist needed to manage the room sensitively - by being scrupulously fair and giving everyone individual attention yet trying to encourage those less confident. She described seeing her leadership as a kind of 'mothering' – that required encouragement but also the management of some strong characters.

Participants noted the importance of having children as part of the workshops. There were always children in the crèche – often taking part in the artwork and activities and always making their presence felt. On occasions older girls and boys joined in if they were off school and having children around added to the relaxed 'homely' atmosphere. There were times when young children disturbed their mothers but generally having the children nearby allowed the mothers to relax. Having children around – especially when beautifully dressed children wanted to play

with paint – certainly made more work for the PU volunteers who often took on the role of playmates for the children.

The sessions were marked by purposefulness and an eagerness to communicate verbally or non-verbally. There was a lot of sharing – of mutual language learning, of music and of food. Importantly the project was a women's space and more specifically it was a domestic space where the normal baggage of domestic life was shared and discussed. The ordinary trials of running a home, looking after children, cooking and cleaning underpinned the project.

There was much laughter – for example in an early session, the artist showed her work made out of under-wires from bras:

***“I presented images of my textile artwork ‘Knot’ and showed found objects that were the inspiration for the artwork; the game ‘Pick up Sticks’ and the under-wires from bras. I stressed that simple objects and ideas can inspire ambitious work. The women, particularly the Syrian mums, found the bra-wires funny.”***

There was also sadness and reflection over loss:

***“One mother who had lost a child spoke bravely and we all took a moment to allow her to express her sadness and recover. Many of us were moved to tears as she spoke.”***

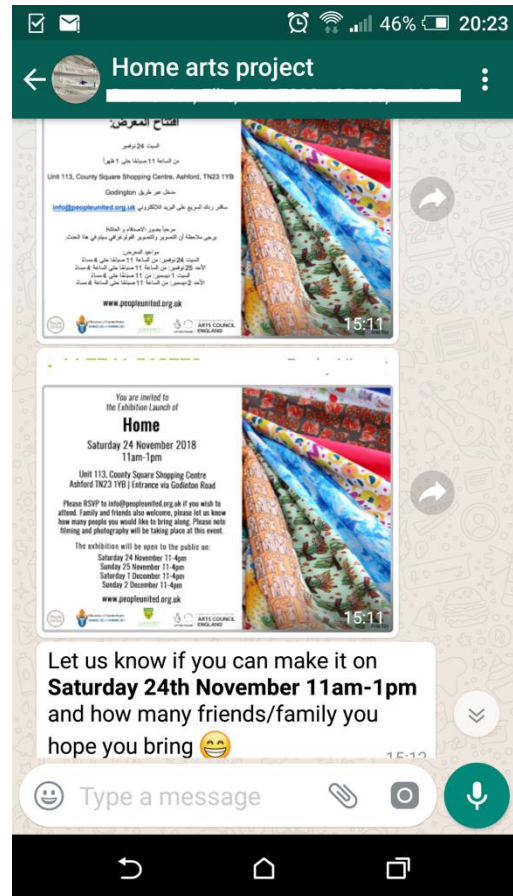
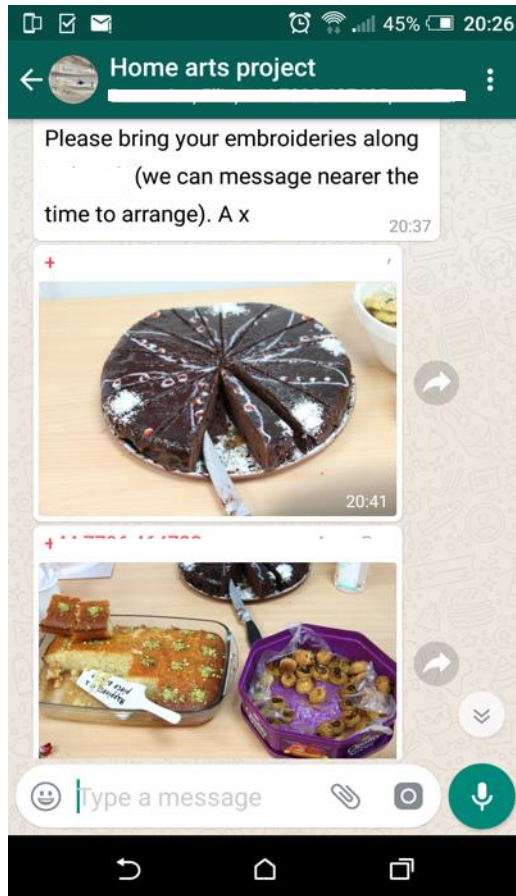
Happy and sad experiences and reflections are universal however and the sharing of laughter and tears may have stood in for the conversations the women could not have directly. Some of the English-speaking mothers said they had wanted to do more ‘mixing’ but recognised that this could not have been forced. The groups of English and Arabic speakers tended to keep together but proximity did the work of breaking down barriers. The project, participants built relationships that made them feel comfortable, warm and familiar towards each other.

**The WhatsApp group** that was created for the project was an important tool and helped encourage communication. As many of the Syrians participants already used it, and didn't use email, WhatsApp was an ideal form of communication. It was very well used and continues to be. The use of emoji's, images and web links makes WhatsApp a very democratic and open way of keeping in touch which allows people to post in whatever language they prefer. Google translate works well to aid simple communication.

The Syrian women in the group were very proficient at using WhatsApp – possibly more so than some of the long-term residents. They understood that messages are most effective when they are brief,



sharing short pieces of news or information. When we had a problem with parking at the Workshops, the group got somewhat side-tracked with long and complex threads that distracted from the posts about daily and creative life.



## *Endings*

As well as putting in a vast amount of time outside the workshops to bring the motifs, drawings, stencils, stamps, felt pieces together in a coherent piece of work, the artist had to manage an ending to the project. By the end of the workshops, there were very strong bonds built between the participants and with all concerned with the project. Even before the last workshop, there had been ‘endings’ as two of the Syrian women left Ashford to live with friends and relatives elsewhere in the UK. This was disruptive to the emerging dynamic and sad for women who felt close and friendly. The onward movement of these women – who left were moving to join family who they had been separated from for a long time – was itself an illustration of the theme of the project. They were moving on from Ashford in a continuing search, negotiation or reinterpretation of home and this was a poignant reminder of the nature of home as impermanent and changing.

The final exhibition was an emotional event but was a celebration more than a farewell and hopefully marks a start of a new phase of relationships driven by the women rather than by the partnership. The on-going legacies of the project are discussed further below.

## *Key elements – learning points*

The following are some learning points drawn from the experience of the project. They are written as suggestions for any organisation considering running a project inspired by ‘Home’.

‘There’s no perfect project’: The project was exploratory and experimental

This quotation came from staff of PU and reflects their experience of running creative and participative community projects. Their point is that when working in participatory practice, there will always be differences between the expectations and assumptions of different parties involved and that compromise is an essential part of delivering projects. Research on PU’s previous projects has pointed to the importance of the ‘freedom to fail’<sup>7</sup> and experience has taught PU the importance of taking creative risks.

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<sup>7</sup> People United (2017) “Changing the World through Arts and Kindness: Evidence from People United projects 2007-2017

## *The importance of fun and friendship*

As with any participative project, 'Home' recognised the importance of fun – in the running of the project and in the outcomes. Fun here refers to the simple enjoyment of people coming together for a common purpose and with a common goal. Throughout the project, the planned activities on any given day were of equal importance to the mood and atmosphere in the group. The artist and others in the partnership were sensitive to allowing the issues that arose from the group to adapt what had been planned. Events such as one of the group leaving the area or having a birthday were treated as occasions to change plans and to allow the participants to lead.

Plans also changed in response to participants' interests – for example in working with a loom. This loom ended up being passed between participants who took it home in turn to work on it between sessions. Similarly, participants worked between sessions on embroidery and on embroidering some of the drawings created in the workshop – this had been planned and prepared for by the artist but was not compulsory.

Friendships have been reinforced and created by the project. Everyone involved has made new friends and have deepened existing relationships. Hopefully some of these new friendships will continue to grow but even if this doesn't happen, the participants have shared positive experiences of feeling 'at home' in Ashford that will reduce any sense of dislocation from the communities they live in. The WhatsApp group, the public exhibitions and the experience of bumping into friendly faces around town are tangible ways in which the participants have made their mark on the town which hopefully will build their confidence to claim it as home.

## *'It's not about refugees': A project for everyone.*

As already noted the project took care not to essentialise the participants as either refugees or 'local' women. Throughout we referred to Syrian women and long-term residents in recognition of the participants' heterogeneity and that when we came together, we knew very little about each other. The long-term Ashford residents were of different ages and had different occupations and histories. They shared English as a working language and an enthusiasm and openness to meeting more recent arrivals in Ashford but otherwise, they had little in common.

Similarly, the women recruited to the project through the ABC were from different areas in Syria and had different educational backgrounds and life experience. The project made no attempt to enquire into the past lives of any of the participants but endeavoured to make it clear that all were welcome. The project's focus on 'women' rather than types of women is important.

### ***Establishing trust***

The project depended on trust. All the women involved as participants accepted some level of risk in participating in the project. These risks included the potential risk of embarrassment or exposure and of hearing the upsetting experiences of others. Everyone involved was stepping into the unknown to some degree and here the partnership was very important as it included people who were known and trusted and who had experience of running similar projects. If needed, there was the capacity to provide one-to-one support.

As noted above, ABC was very important in giving credibility to the project – especially to the Syrian women for whom ABC is something of an interface between their old and new lives. Staff from ABC have an important role in introducing newly-arrived families to many aspects of British life so their backing of the project was key. Similarly, the DoC is well known amongst Syrian families and was also able to give credibility to the project through its links with long-standing communities in the area. PU is well known for its artist-led projects and its involvement raised the profile of the project and guaranteed the excellence of the artistic experience.

Above all, trust was built through the experience of the workshops and through sharing and getting to know each other slowly and respectfully.

### ***Managing the partnership***

Having the backing of these well-known and capable organisations (ABC, DoC and PU) was very important in the on-going running of the project. However, it is important to remember that, despite organisational backing, the project relied on a few, over-stretched staff members. They were called on to perform a range of jobs like re-drafting documents, finding translators, childcare staff, resources, sorting out problems with

parking at the venue and dealing with all sorts of issues arising. This willingness and capacity to solve problems at short notice was remarkable and an important part of the project. It was referred to by one of the partner organisation staff as “a quiet contribution”.

Just as the Home project sought to promote kindness in the relationships between the participants of the project, it is important to promote kindness in ways of working to deliver the project. Open communication and actively recognising contributions is part of this.

### Planning and Communication

A clear communication strategy includes agreeing beforehand how the partner organisations will communicate internally and externally.

In the ‘Home’ project, the partners discussed the project often via email, phone calls and face-to-face conversations. That said, a clearer strategy to feedback on successes, concerns and matters arising might have both reduced the collective workload by clarifying what was needed in good time and by ensuring that everyone was agreed on how the project was progressing. There is always a tension between having formal meetings to discuss project progress versus looser forms of updating and reporting. Clearly it is not necessary to inform every one of every operational detail but instead to develop an effective way of ensuring that areas of responsibility are agreed and feedback pathways understood.

Excellent and generous team working was a key characteristic of the project. There was a clear enthusiasm and determination to make the project work on all sides. The precise way communication happens between different organisations depends largely on personal and organisation style and on the amount of time available and commitment to other projects and work. There is no one size fits all, rather it is the commitment to shared values that matters.

Agreeing an external communication strategy, understood by all partners, is therefore important for projects such as these. Such a strategy can be flexible and can be amended through the progress of the Project but it needs to be clear from the start that the different partners will have different interests in communicating and sharing posts about the project. These interests should be clear to all. For example, images shared of the process may be subject to different ‘controls’ than images of the final products of the project. There may be different attitudes to the ‘ownership’ of images with some parties seeing them as artistic

outcomes while others see them as part of an archive of activities. In this project, many photographs were taken by the artist, some of which were given to the participants themselves; this was very much appreciated by the recipients but was an add-on to the more general record that the artist and team members made of the project. The use of social media, including sharing and crediting images and posts, is an obvious area that needs to be agreed upon from the start as it can be assumed that partner organisations and the individuals involved, including participants, will have different on-line presences. These issues need to be considered early in the project to ensure that the integrity of the project is maintained and its ownership (collective, shared or individual) is recognised. Questions to ask early in the project could include: What are the limitations that will be placed on participants sharing images and information about the project? Will the partners collectively or separately share news of the project? How should the project be credited by these different parties? How to recognise all contributions without having to refer to all the parties on every single post?

### ***Running the sessions***

'Home' was an open project. Participants were free to come and go throughout the duration of the project. Such projects are very powerful but difficult to manage artistically and administratively. They require confidence on the part of project leaders and a team who are prepared to adapt, put in extra time and call in extra resources at short notice. The partnership behind 'Home' coped remarkably well with the ongoing and frequently changing demands of the project as participants changed.

### ***Informed Consent and Consent forms***

Much has been learned about the complexities of evidencing consent and permissions to use photos etc (through forms). In my view the partners need to take stock of what has been learned. What does best practice look like when part of the group doesn't really understand what they are being asked to consent to or when some in the group understand the issues differently from others? How can this be managed ethically and meaningfully? Anyone seeking to replicate the 'Home' project needs to think carefully about how they will comply with GDPR

(General Data Protection Regulation), as a very minimum, but more importantly think through what they are asking participants to consent to and why they are asking it. There are many aspects to this - among them the need for participants to consent to their images and words being used as part of the artist's commission, for publicity, blogs, funding applications, research purposes and much more.

Giving fully informed consent, whether to take part in the project, in the research, to give permission for the use of personal information, photographs, sound and video is complex and rarely taken seriously. There is always a balance to be struck between over-emphasis of risk – which can make people unnecessarily fearful, and under-emphasis when risks are downplayed.

The goal of establishing 'informed consent' is difficult when so often it is genuinely impossible to know what use will be made of digital images and other content. Given that long-term residents of various ages living in the UK are only slowly coming to terms with living their lives on the Internet it is reasonable to expect that recent arrivals from Syria will make different calculations of what is an acceptable risk when giving consent to the use of their personal information. The Syrian participants, as people who have been forced to live their lives internationally and virtually, may be more sophisticated at making these calculations than some of the long-term residents who are less digitally 'experienced' and literate but it is clear that the basis for negotiating and calculating risk on the internet will be different between the two groups.

Consent forms, which are a part of all projects holding any kind of personal data, are time consuming and potentially tokenistic, meeting an administrative purpose only. However, they are designed and used; they are an alien, or at least new, concept for the Syrian women. Learning about them is in itself an important learning outcome for any new arrival to the UK. The consent forms represented a best attempt at drawing attention to the potential risk of participation and of sharing information – they allowed a pause for consideration before agreeing to share photos or data and ensuring they were translated into Arabic and explained by Interpreters was important. Some of the women did withhold their consent to the sharing of photos which is reassuring as it means that they felt empowered to refuse permission. Interestingly, some were prepared to give permission for their children's images to be used but withhold it for their own perhaps indicating a different risk calculation than might be typical in the UK. Tellingly, even when they had given



consent for the project to use their pictures, they still wanted to approve images that would be used publicly.

### *The Venue*

The training centre is well known to the Syrian families who go there regularly. They feel at home there and visit the centre for English and other classes. The training centre is something of a hub for the Syrian community and it was a convenient and practical venue. As described above, child care was provided in the room where the workshops were taking place. The presence of small children was distracting to some degree but it contributed to the informality of the sessions and was reassuring for some of the mothers. The venue is also close to public transport and has parking spaces.

Now the project is completed, the training centre will continue to be important for the participants. It runs social events including fund raisers and Zumba classes which are open to all and will include the long-term Ashford participants in future events.

Resources: Interpreters, Translators and Child care

The partnership was well connected and able to draw in the resources it needed. Through its unique experience working with Syrian refugees, ABC has developed skills in working with interpreters and ABC ensured that skilled interpreters who were known to the women involved were made available to the project. Although the need for interpreters in projects such as this is widely understood, the actual provision of interpreters is often problematic and insufficient. The interpreters working for 'Home' were committed to the project and took a keen interest in its success; they too became participants in the project.

The project required the occasional translation of forms and documents and again, the partnership had the contacts to get this done. This was sometimes done overnight and it is important to note that had the projects relied on commercial translation services, this would not have been possible and very much more expensive. Any project seeking to replicate elements of this project needs to consider this.

The availability of child care, as discussed above, was essential to allow the women to concentrate and for the smooth running of the workshops.

## *Managing an ending*

At the final Exhibition, the participants were clearly sad that the project was ending and stated their hopes to keep and build on connections made. The Training Centre will be important in this and the weekly meetings self-organised by the participants and held in the 'Made in Ashford' shop in the town centre are a significant outcome and legacy of the project. These sessions are made possible by the efforts of two very enthusiastic project participants. These sessions are very different from the project workshops and the organisers are open to letting these sessions develop freely building on existing relationships. Hopefully they will provide a space for relationships to continue and gain a new momentum.

## *Overall conclusions*

The project was successful in meeting its goals and surprised and delighted many of those involved.

The project set out to:

- Explore a what home means to women living in Ashford
- Encourage social cohesion and sense of belonging in the town
- Encourage newly arrived women from Syria to engage with local communities
- Encourage artistic activity and participation in Ashford
- Develop creative ways of engaging with communities and learn how arts and creativity can transform lives for the better
- Demonstrate the role the arts can play in achieving artistic and social goals
- Collaborate with other artistic partners across Kent
- Build new partnerships which can support the longer term legacy of our work.

These goals were all met (in the author's view) and, in particular, the project has encouraged and energised individuals and groups working in the Arts in Ashford. The legacy of the project for the participants has been, at the least, a new understanding of who lives in Ashford and how people of different ethnic and social backgrounds can find commonality. More ambitiously, we can hope that at least some of the participants will continue to stay in touch and even make art together. From the connections made on this project we can be confident that women will

experience the town as a more homely place in their day-to-day interactions around the town.

The partnership between PU, DoC and ABC will also hopefully continue. They have made new connections with the Training centre which could potentially be a partner in future projects. The artist, has also demonstrated her capacity and commitment to a complex and challenging project and undoubtedly her artistic practice has benefited from the experience.

The power of the project was in its capacity to evolve and develop through the workshops and this was in no small part due to the artist's willingness and confidence to let it change. The partners set a tone that was open-hearted and generous which allowed new participants to feel welcome and valued.

### ***Project Legacies***

The project finished on the high note of the public exhibition in County Square, Ashford but is still on-going in many ways. An episode of the BBC's *Inside Out Southeast* aired on the 21<sup>st</sup> of January, 2019, featured the 'Home' project and reached a wide audience. It is hoped that further exhibitions will follow. This film and the exhibition are public demonstrations of the contribution of the project to public life in Ashford and hopefully have fed in to efforts made to make the town a welcoming and friendly place. The testimony of participants indicates that everyone involved has increased their sense of connection to the town and to its communities.

As already mentioned, there are high hopes that the friendships made during 'Home' will continue and extend and that the participants' sense of connection to Ashford and its communities will develop positively. Some of the participants continue to get together to make art at weekly workshops and the fact that participants feel inspired to pick up the legacy of the project themselves, in their spare time, is a very significant outcome for a community project. It is a wonderful development and it shows how the participants have taken ownership of the project - an achievement that any community-based project should be very proud of.

At a more individual level, some of the participants have described how the project has fed into their creative development and encouraged them

to make art for the first time or to develop their practice. One of the participants became an intern with PU.

A final potential legacy of the project would be for it to be adapted as a model or inspiration for other projects using participative arts projects to bring together people who, for whatever reason, would benefit from exploring their relationship to their homes – past, present and future. This report describes a specific project run by a specific partnership but there are many lessons learned here that could support other spin-off projects. Running a project of this complexity however, is not a simple undertaking and hopefully this report has shown how creating and achieving a meaningful arts-based community project requires careful planning, partnership working, a high level of skill and experience and commitment from all involved.

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