

creative accelerator BRIDGWATER

WHAT WILL YOU THINK OF NEXT?



**ACTION RESEARCH
CONSULTATION SESSIONS**

Facilitated by
Seed

A FREE MUSIC FESTIVAL

PODCASTS

INTERACTIVE ART

CRAFT GROUPS

OUTDOOR THEATRE

POPOP JAZZ LOUNGE

COMMUNITY SCULPTURE

Report: May 2024

Creative Accelerator BRIDGWATER

Almost 100 people living, working &/or with a keen interest in our 2024 focus area of Bridgwater joined us across nine sessions between October 2023 and April 2024 (online and in person), as consultation focus groups to workshop ideas about how to further develop and enhance the creative life of the town. Sessions were held in multiple locations, as part of where other events were taking place, and in partnership with consortium organisations including Young Somerset, Bridgwater Senior Citizens Forum and Homes in Sedgemoor as well as other organisations/events including Bridgwater Together.

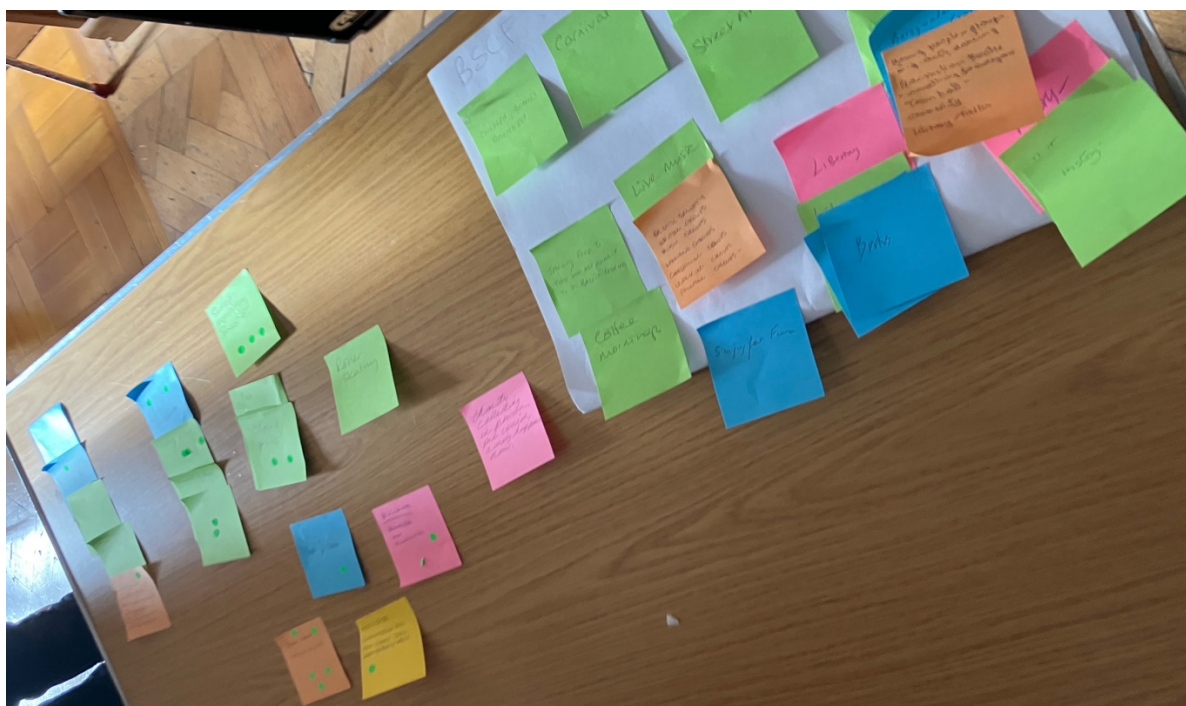
Focus group participants were asked to consider five key questions and created a large number of ideas during the sessions

- How can we make more of the best things happening in the areas already?
- What great activities & facilities have been lost? Why?
- What creative activities and arts facilities do the areas need?
- What could we create that would be special and unique to each of them?
- What could a creative hub look like in your community?

Using the concept of an ideas market, the participants prioritised ideas and determined which things they valued the most within their group. Where groups were small, a conversation model was used in place of the ideas market.

The following is a summary of what our Creative Accelerator participants determined.

Note: this report is not intended to represent a comprehensive community consultation or a definitive picture of needs in Bridgwater. It is a snapshot of the views, opinions and experiences of the particular participants in the nine sessions held in 2023 & 2024. Lists appear in alphabetical order, not priority or popularity.



Initial Ideas

Participants reflected on what they most valued in Bridgwater in terms of its creative, event and activity offering. Across the various groups around 40 current activities, facilities and events were identified as valued, including some Seed activities and consortium offers:

Amateur dramatic societies	Local History groups
Blake Gardens (rotunda/bandstand)	McMillan Theatre
Blake Museum	Music Participation Groups
Bookclubs	Operatic society
Bridgwater Arts Centre	Painting Groups
Bridgwater College	Poetry Groups
Bridgwater Fair	Public Art/Statues/Willow Man
Bridgwater Library	Pubs
Bridgwater Together	Quayside Festival
Bridgy Gallery	Rollercoaster
Carnival (parade and concerts)	Scrabble Group
Cinema	Sedgemoor FM
Coleridge Cottage	Sewing Group
Front Garden Music Festival	Somerset Film/The Engine Room
Fyne Court	Street Art
Gardening Groups	The Arts Society
Guitar & Bass Group	The Brick & Tile Museum
Heritage Architecture including Railway station	Town Hall Events
Language Groups	Writing Groups
Live Music Venues	

Several of the consultation sessions took place in the lounges and community rooms of Homes in Sedgemoor properties, where residents told us about the activities that take place there, including:

Bingo
Coffee afternoon and tea mornings
Days out with Family members
Jazz Blues Night
Knit & Natter
Murder Mystery night
Takeaway night
Warm spaces creative activities (previously commissioned by Seed)

(nb not all locations have all listed activities)

Several clear themes emerged during the discussions including:

- Many people living in Bridgwater consider that they have a rich creative &/or cultural life already, and a proud history of culture in Bridgwater including the length of time Carnival has run, and historic firsts such as the first Arts Council funded Arts Centre and a very early Carnegie Mellon funded library, through to the famous creative residents it claims such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Joe Strummer.

- There is plenty in Bridgwater to build on already and a view that there is a lot more on offer in Bridgwater than in other parts of Sedgemoor
- Carnival is, to many people, a key part of life in the Bridgwater and an essential part of the cultural identity/offer of the town, while in some sessions particularly younger people felt that while Carnival was a great family activity it did not appeal to, or seem relevant to them as young adults living in Bridgwater
- Some participants considered that they were happy with the existing cultural offers in Bridgwater, and were not looking for more, while other participants felt that the existing offers were not for them, and would very much like something new that they have a hand in creating
- Many participants expressed the view that while they valued existing offers and facilities, they didn't necessarily attend very often, or even at all.

Participants also identified around 40 things that used to be available in Bridgwater are no longer. The nine *most missed* (by some margin) were:

A proper bookshop
Bridgwater Splash/Swimming Pool/Lido
Classical Music concerts
Closed Pubs/lost live music venues
Free Local Newspaper
Public Transport that connected the town especially after hours
Theatre & drama groups
Tourism Office where you can find out what's on
Variety/diversity of shops/social life around the town centre/reason to go to the town centre

Many people said that they do not visit the town centre as much as they used to. Reasons for this varied, including a sense of feeling unsafe, through to the lack of any attraction or activity that would draw them to the town centre. These views were particularly prevalent among older and teenage/young adult residents of Bridgwater, less so among the ages in between.

Looking forward

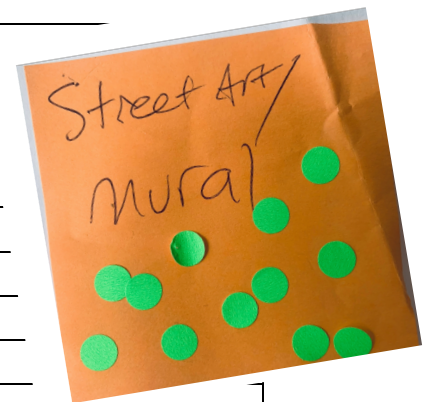
Participants engaged with the question 'What would I like to be able to do in Bridgwater that I currently cannot?'. This focused on activities that people could take part in or create for themselves as well as facilities and activities that people could attend as audience members.

The groups identified more than 50 activities they would like to be able to do in Bridgwater but currently cannot, and/or ideas for improved or new creative amenities in the town.



The 15 ideas which had the *most* support among participants in the accelerator sessions were:

A large mural – not just created by artists, co-created with community members (idea/ design/ creation) – locations suggested included on the old post office/bus station wall
Accessible art in outdoor spaces– like the Moments in Mendip project
Activities in empty shops and on the streets with the roads closed
Activities which draw people around themes including the environment, building community and bringing people together
Another interactive augmented reality activity like the Hidden Station project – Tall Ships in the docks or on the river for example
Collecting and sharing stories and reminiscences of the older generation
Dance and Drama activities including lessons and groups
Environmentally themed art works and activities,
Exchange of unwanted items/upcycling
Interactive creative sessions for people in housing complexes and care homes
(more) music activities including songwriting and composing workshops, African drumming
Pottery activities, including with a wheel
Public art including ideas ranging from a new symbol for Bridgwater to a Climate Countdown clock
Things celebrating the history of Bridgwater including the docks, the cellophane clock, the industry
Things connecting the town to its rural setting



We also offered the idea of ‘Go See/Come Try’ trips where different possible events, venues and destinations could be considered. The most popular ideas generated and supported in the discussions were those that could be supported with a guide and involved the journey as part of the experience. Preferred locations/activities were:

Bath & Wells,
Concerts
Historic properties & Gardens
London
Museums
Musical Theatre performances
Outdoor events
River trips
The National Gallery (in particular) and other established art galleries and exhibitions



Those living in Homes in Sedgemoor Properties told us they would very much like to be offered things to see and do in their common rooms/halls (including those who had previously experienced our warm spaces commissions in those locations). The most popular suggestions were:

Arts and craft activities that are not too hard to take part in
Chair based movement activities
Flower arranging
Interesting talks

Music activities to actively participate in
Music performances to watch/listen to
Storytelling

Bridgwater as a Cultural and Creative Hub

Existing venues and facilities such as Bridgwater Arts Centre, The Engine Room, McMillan Theatre and Bridgwater Library were identified as valuable creative hubs, but many people suggested that they did not feel that these locations were suitable for all activities or for everybody. These participants were keen to explore the ideas of other potential locations for creative activity. This included making use of the community centres, the YMCA and community rooms in other buildings to attract people who might be intimidated or feel excluded by an arts venue to take part. There were also several suggestions for a permanent community hub to be run by the community not the Council, but it was not clear how this would differ from the existing facilities and offers.

Places that were identified as not currently utilised for their potential as venues for creative and cultural activity included:

Angel Crescent
Blake Gardens
Brewery Fields – although it was noted that in its current set up it is not suitable for running events
Castle Street
Empty shops and buildings including the former Scott Cinema, the Old Legion and Mecca Bingo sites were mentioned as places that could be creatively redeveloped with a community and cultural element
Northgate site
Secondary Schools
St Mary’s Church
The Docks
The Town Hall

Distinguishing Factors

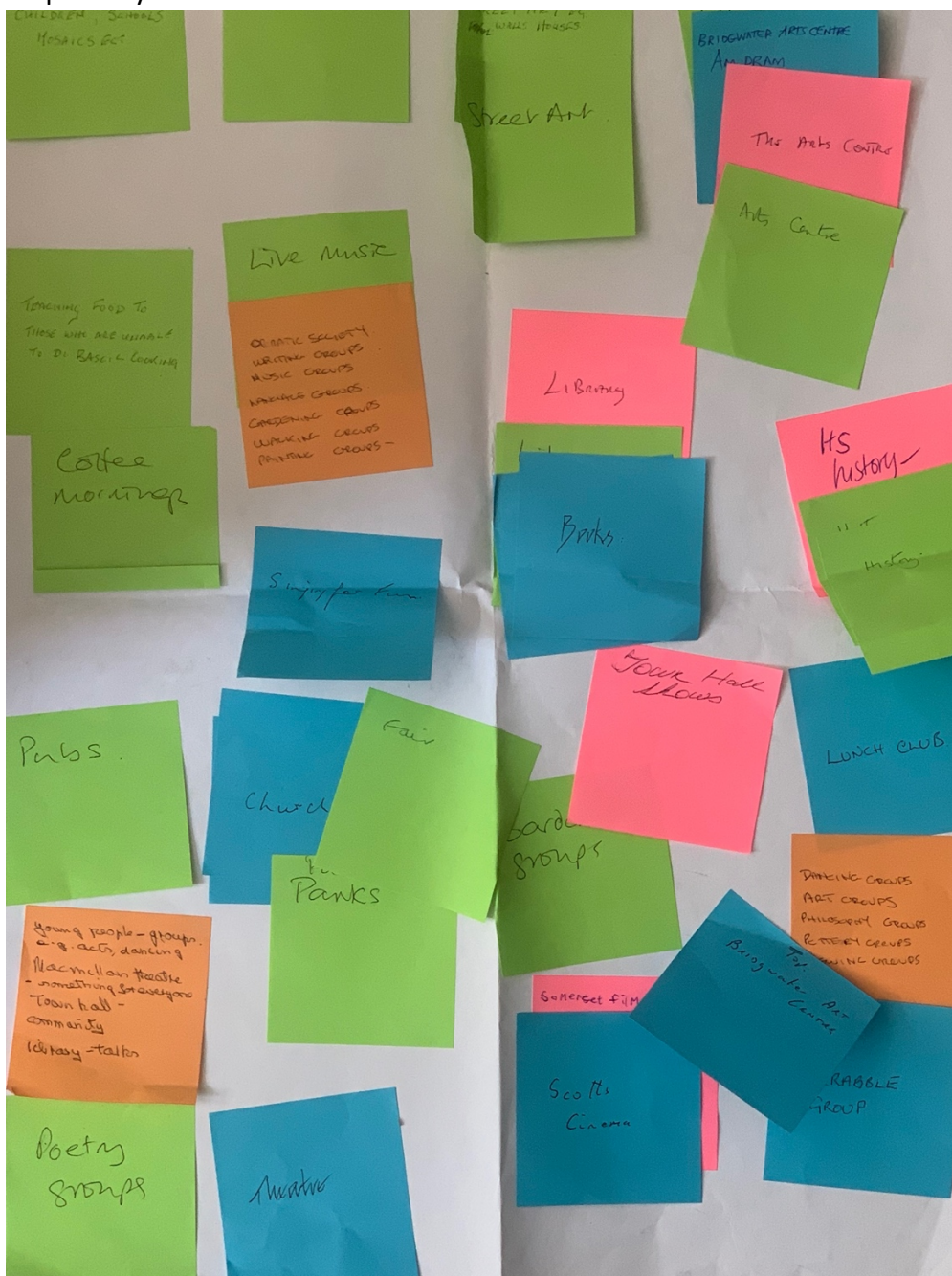
Participants also engaged with questions around what is unique and wonderful about Bridgwater and what opportunities arise from that which would be unique and distinctive to the town and the people that live here. The most supported ideas were:

Activities engaging and showcasing the hidden diverse cultures of Bridgwater
Artworks could establish a sense of <i>modern</i> identity for Bridgwater
Celebrating the Romantic Poets that walked our streets
Events/activities that link Heritage crafts & industry to current artists & crafts people
Evolution and adaptability – The town has always been open to new ideas and wants its industry to evolve, work in the town has constantly changed
Industrial history (and present with Hinkley Point)
Interesting creative, cultural and retail offers
Music activities that encourage local participation
Rebelliousness & Revolution
Squibbing
Things that counter stereotypes about ageing

Things that counter stereotypes about Bridgwater – eg turning ‘Normal for Bridgwater’ on its’ head
Tolerance and acceptance and its long history in Bridgwater from anti-slavery through to the traveller community at the fair (originally a horse fair) and the pineapple as a symbol of welcome and acceptance
Welcoming and friendly

These findings were compatible with the themes of identity for Bridgwater that have emerged from our previous consultations:

- Bridgwater as a ‘Rebel’ Town
- Kindness as a trait of Bridgwater people
- Adaptability and reinvention



Key Findings

The Creative Accelerator Bridgwater participants demonstrated a desire to build a sense of place and community connection where they live, and agreed that creative activities would be an effective and engaging way to address that.

The sessions strongly reinforced and supported Seed's other consultation findings that:

- a) Like other people in Sedgemoor, many residents of Bridgwater would like to participate in new arts and other creative activities, in addition to what is on offer
- b) Providing activities locally is essential, and even in Bridgwater many people would rather activities be located where they already are/frequent rather than at the existing venues and facilities
- c) Activities that connect communities and bring people together are the priority

With so many different ideas produced and supported across the nine sessions, it was not possible to narrow down the findings to a simple set of recommendations for future activity. The sessions did indicate, however, that Seed should commission activities in these three areas which:

- Connect people within and between communities
- Take place at a local level
- Respond to the existing strengths and distinctive character of Bridgwater and its communities
- Respond to the most popular ideas for future activity and/or the ideas for unique or distinctive activities as listed in this report.

Next Steps

Seed will:

- Deliver this year's Front Garden Music Festival Bridgwater Site at Victoria Park in partnership with the Community Centre
- Plan and deliver 'go see/come & try' activities where residents in Bridgwater will be able to travel by bus to see activities in line with expressed interests that are not available in the town
- Extend the Bridgwater Guitar & Bass group activities for another year
- Proceed with our planned creative takeover of a shop in central Bridgwater and ensure that the programme responds to the priorities established in these discussions
- Partner with other organisers and providers to deliver more 'out of venue' activities
- Look for opportunities to partner with Bridgwater Town Council, Somerset Council and the Bridgwater Town Deal and advance the idea of street art and a major mural at the old post office location
- Call for expressions of interest from artists and local groups/organisations to propose creative arts events and participatory activities to take place in Bridgwater between July 2024 and April 2025, in response to the priorities identified in this report, and invite local people to participate in selecting which of these proposals are commissioned.

