

Prepared for:

Seed Sedgemoor

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LEARNING AT THE POINT OF PIVOT

Distilling insight to inform future cultural work in Sedgemoor



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PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER

This paper sits alongside the 2024 to 2025 Critical Friend report and the final independent evaluation. Those documents assess Seed's impact and future options. This paper has a different purpose.

While the Creative People and Places programme is now reaching the end of its funded period, Seed as an organisation will continue as a voluntary CIO and is at a 'point of pivot' in its timeline.

This document distils what the programme has clarified about working culturally in Sedgemoor and the reflections in this paper therefore relate specifically to the programme phase of Seed's work rather than to the ongoing life of the organisation.

Seed operated in a coastal and rural district marked by dispersed settlements, uneven infrastructure, limited transport and economic pressure. Cultural opportunity has been constrained, and institutional trust uneven. Within this context, Seed tested models of co-creation, partnership governance, artist commissioning and phased sustainability.

At this time of change, there is a risk that this relational and practical knowledge dissipates. This paper surfaces what became clearer through delivery: what supported cultural confidence, what structural barriers persisted, and where partnership models aligned or struggled.

It does not re-evaluate the programme or propose a new structure. Instead, it offers grounded reflection for those continuing cultural and civic work in Sedgemoor, asking what should inform what happens next.

HOW TO USE THIS PAPER

This document is intended as a working reflection tool for Seed’s partners, collaborators and local stakeholders as the CPP programme concludes.

It is not a formal strategy and does not prescribe a future structure. Instead, it gathers insight from Seed’s experience in Sedgemoor and offers it back to those who will continue cultural, civic or community work in the district.

Partners may wish to use this paper in the following ways.

AS A FACILITATED DISCUSSION FRAMEWORK

Board members, the team or stakeholders may choose to read one section at a time and use it to structure reflective conversation. For example:

- In ‘What Seed Made Possible’, which elements of this approach are most relevant to our future work?
- In ‘What the System Made Difficult’, which barriers are still present in our own operating environment?
- In ‘What Feels Transferable’, which practices or values do we feel confident carrying forward, and which require different conditions?

AS A PLANNING REFERENCE POINT

Organisations developing new funding bids, partnership agreements or local initiatives may use this paper to sense-check their assumptions. It offers grounded insight into what has and has not worked in Sedgemoor’s rural and coastal context, including issues of visibility, trust-building, hub development, partnership dynamics and sustainability.

AS A KNOWLEDGE RETENTION DOCUMENT

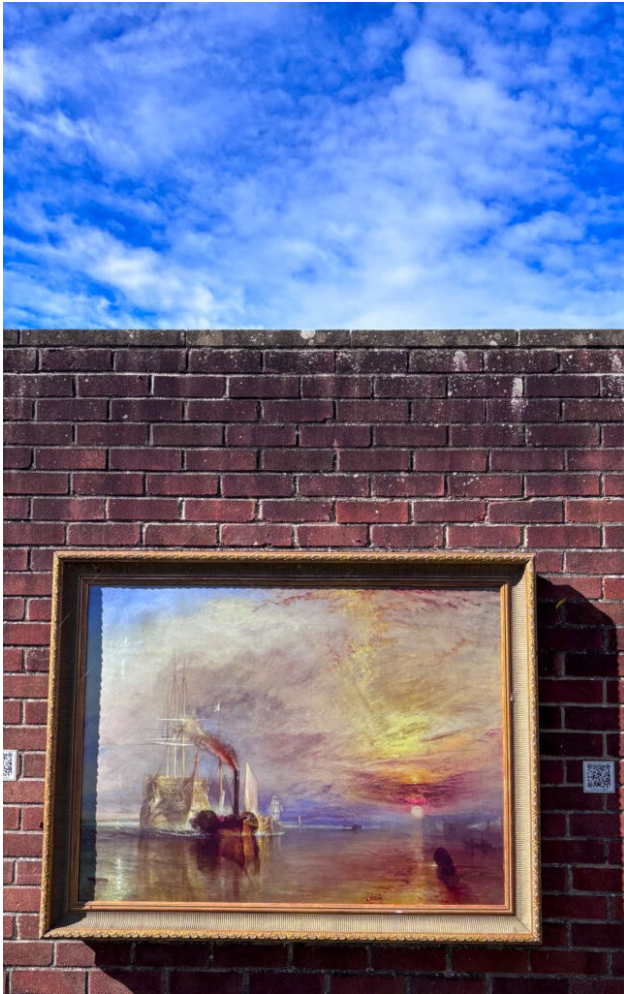
Seed’s work generated relational knowledge that is not always captured in monitoring data. This paper aims to retain that learning within the local ecology. Partners may wish to share relevant sections with new staff, trustees or collaborators entering the Sedgemoor cultural landscape.

AS A PROMPT FOR ROLE CLARITY

With Seed’s CPP-oriented structure pivoting, each partner will continue in some form. This paper can support reflection on questions such as:

- What role are we now playing in sustaining cultural opportunity locally?
- Where do we have agency to act, and where do we need collaboration?
- What gaps are emerging that were previously held by Seed?

The document is not intended to close down conversation. Rather, it is designed to create a space for considered reflection at a moment of transition. Its value lies in helping partners move forward with greater clarity about the conditions, behaviours and relationships that have shaped cultural development in Sedgemoor over the past years.



1. CONTEXT & INTENT

Seed Sedgemoor was established within the Arts Council England Creative People and Places programme to address persistent low engagement in arts, culture and heritage across the district. Sedgemoor met the national criteria as a ‘cold spot’, but statistics alone did not capture the lived reality of the place.

Sedgemoor is geographically dispersed, with small towns, coastal settlements and rural villages separated by limited public transport and uneven infrastructure. Bridgwater functions as a centre of gravity, yet Highbridge, Burnham on Sea, Cheddar, Axbridge, Edington and surrounding villages each hold distinct identities and differing levels of provision. Cultural infrastructure is patchy. Some areas have strong informal creative networks but limited venues. Others have buildings but fragile programming capacity. Across the district there are patterns of economic pressure, social isolation and low confidence in cultural entitlement.

Seed’s intent was not simply to programme events. Its mission was to make creative arts, culture and heritage part of everyday life in Sedgemoor by growing new opportunities for people to participate, create and celebrate. Its vision was long term: that by 2030 creative opportunities would be more accessible and that more people would actively shape and take advantage of them.

From the outset, Seed embedded participatory action research as a core methodology. Consultation was not treated as a single early-stage exercise but as an ongoing practice. The ‘Plough, Sow, Grow, Yield’ model framed activity as developmental rather than transactional. The hub approach, particularly visible in Highbridge, sought to remove barriers created by geography by focusing energy locally, building confidence, and gradually stepping back.

Seed operated as a consortium of community organisations rather than a single cultural institution. This structure brought reach and legitimacy but also complexity. It required constant negotiation of roles, expectations and resource distribution. The programme evolved during a period shaped by COVID, cost of living pressures and local government restructuring. These contextual factors influenced pace, capacity and community appetite.

Over time, Seed worked across multiple scales:

- **Small-scale participatory projects** such as Glow Home, which prioritised accessibility and connection during periods of isolation.
- **Hub-based initiatives** such as Highbridge Youth Arts and Blues in the Pews, which built sustained local ownership.
- **Larger-scale visible interventions** such as Art Road Trip and Front Garden Music Festivals, which shifted perceptions of what was possible locally.
- **Artist development and commissioning models** that strengthened local creative capacity.

The independent evaluation evidences significant reach, high levels of first-time engagement and strong participant satisfaction. It also highlights the appetite for both traditional and contemporary cultural experiences, the importance of trusted spaces, and the value of visible, place-based programming. The earlier Critical Friend work surfaced governance tensions, partnership fragility and the structural pressures facing place-based cultural development in rural and coastal contexts.

This paper does not revisit those findings in detail. Instead, it takes them as context.

At the point of transition, the key question is not whether Seed met its targets, but what its presence clarified about Sedgemoor itself. What conditions enabled engagement to grow? What behaviours built trust? Where did structures struggle? How did local confidence shift? And what does this tell partners about the realities of sustaining cultural opportunity in this geography?

Section 2 turns to what Seed made possible within this context.



2. WHAT MADE SEED POSSIBLE

Seed's contribution in Sedgemoor was not defined by a single flagship project. Its distinctiveness lay in the conditions it created over time. Across hubs, commissions and partnerships, Seed made certain shifts possible that were previously fragile, sporadic or unseen.

2.1 CULTURAL CONFIDENCE IN PLACE

In towns such as Highbridge and Bridgwater, Seed activity contributed to a visible shift in confidence. Participants repeatedly described surprise that work of high quality and ambition was happening locally. Events such as Blossoming Bridgwater, Art Road Trip and the Front Garden Music Festivals altered perceptions of what was possible in Sedgemoor. Comments such as 'it felt like I was at a London show' or 'I never thought this would happen here' signal more than enjoyment. They indicate a recalibration of local cultural expectation.

This shift was not solely about artistic quality. It was about legitimacy. When national partners such as the National Gallery came to Bridgwater, or when local churches and pubs became venues for ambitious programming, it reinforced the message that Sedgemoor was worthy of investment and attention.

Over time, this contributed to increased pride of place. Evaluation data from Art Road Trip, for example, showed a high proportion of participants reporting feeling prouder of their local area. Similar sentiments emerged in Highbridge, where residents spoke of the town no longer feeling like a 'desert'.

2.2 TRUSTED LOCAL PLATFORMS

Seed did not create community from scratch. Sedgemoor already had strong informal networks, voluntary energy and creative skill. What Seed provided was a structured but flexible platform through which this energy could gather momentum.

In Highbridge, the hub model enabled local champions to test ideas without fear of failure. Projects such as Blues in the Pews, Highbridge Youth Arts and the Front Garden Music Festival were initiated and shaped locally, with Seed providing funding, administrative support and safeguarding frameworks. The tapered funding model encouraged sustainability rather than dependency.

Partners consistently described the value of Seed's balance between support and autonomy. Artists and community organisers were not left alone to navigate funding systems, licensing or governance requirements, but nor were they over-directed. This balance built practical capability. Individuals learned how to write funding applications, manage risk assessments, curate programmes and steward volunteers.

The result was not simply successful events, but an increase in local capacity.

2.3 ACCESS WITHOUT STIGMA

Seed's approach to access was pragmatic and embedded. Many projects were free or low cost. Activities were located in familiar, everyday spaces such as shopping centres, churches, front gardens and community halls. Workshops were designed to be drop-in and family friendly. Transport, food and step-free venues were considered where needed.

Importantly, this access was framed positively rather than as deficit correction. Participants were not positioned as 'hard to reach' but as creative people whose skills and preferences mattered. Projects such as Glow Home recognised existing creativity and invited it into a collective frame.

The evaluation data evidences strong participation from first-time attenders, disabled participants and those who had not previously engaged in arts activity. The Loneliness Project survey also revealed a population keen to learn and share skills, to connect locally, and to contribute ideas. Seed's programming responded to these preferences.

2.4 ARTISTIC AMBITION ROOTED IN PLACE

Seed did not reduce ambition in order to widen participation. Projects combined professional artists with community collaboration. Blossoming Bridgwater involved Royal Ballet and Opera materials and a commissioned pianist while remaining locally grounded. Art Road Trip introduced national collections in high footfall public spaces. Blues in the Pews balanced structured musical quality with open improvisation. Programmes also brought nationally and internationally recognised artists into local venues, such as when the world-renowned jazz ensemble Empirical brought their cutting-edge sound to the Engine Room.

This combination of excellence and accessibility was central. Participants frequently described events as professional, surprising and emotionally moving. The presence of high production values appeared to increase rather than reduce local engagement.

At the same time, artists were encouraged to respond to place. Front Garden festivals were hyperlocal by design. Moments of Stillness invited residents to document their own landscapes. This rootedness helped mitigate suspicion of external intervention.

2.5 NETWORK DENSITY AND COLLABORATION

Seed strengthened horizontal connections within Sedgemoor's creative ecology. Musicians met through Blues in the Pews went on to establish new events. Community organisers collaborated across projects. Local businesses displayed artworks and posters. Churches, pubs and town councils engaged in joint delivery.

Several interviewees described meeting people they would not otherwise have encountered. This increase in network density reduced isolation between small groups and encouraged resource sharing. In some cases, entirely new organisations emerged, such as Our Highbridge.

While not all collaborations were seamless, the overall effect was a more visible and connected creative landscape.

2.6 A SHIFT IN NARRATIVE

Perhaps the most intangible but significant contribution was narrative. Seed helped reframe Sedgemoor not solely as an area of deprivation or low engagement, but as a place of existing creativity with under-recognised potential.

The evaluation repeatedly demonstrates that residents already held creative skills and appetite. What was often missing was invitation, coordination and confidence. By naming and amplifying local talent, Seed altered the story communities told about themselves.

This narrative shift is fragile. It relies on continued activity and visible opportunity. However, the underlying capacity and experience now exist within the district.

Section 3 turns to the structural and contextual barriers that shaped this work and, at times, constrained it.



3. WHAT THE SYSTEM MADE DIFFICULT

Seed's work in Sedgemoor demonstrated what is possible when time, resource and trust are invested in place. It also exposed persistent structural tensions that shaped delivery and sustainability. These were not failures of individuals. They were features of the wider system within which Seed operated.

3.1 RURAL AND COASTAL GEOGRAPHY

Sedgemoor's dispersed geography was a consistent structural constraint. Travel between Bridgwater, Highbridge, Burnham on Sea, Cheddar and smaller villages is not straightforward, particularly for young people, older residents and those without access to private transport. Evening events required additional planning. Rehearsals, meetings and volunteer coordination were harder to sustain across distance.

The hub model partially mitigated this by concentrating energy locally. However, it also meant that activity could feel uneven across the district. Where Seed was visible, momentum grew. Where it was less present, perceptions of absence remained.

Seed's relatively small organisational size also meant that it could not work concurrently across the entire district. As focus shifted between localities, some groups understandably felt disappointed when activity moved elsewhere. This dynamic was not always well understood by partners or national organisations unfamiliar with the practical logistics of working across dispersed rural communities with limited transport and uneven infrastructure.

This tension between local focus and district-wide equity was never fully resolved because it reflects the underlying geography rather than a programme design flaw.

3.2 PARTNERSHIP COMPLEXITY

Seed was structured as a consortium of community organisations. This model brought credibility and reach, but it also required ongoing negotiation of roles, expectations and accountability.

Partners operated at different scales, with differing governance cultures, financial pressures and strategic priorities. As the earlier Critical Friend report identified, clarity around decision-making, delegated authority and resource distribution required continual attention. When capacity within one partner shifted, the system felt it.

This was compounded by wider local authority restructuring and funding uncertainty. The landscape in which Seed was originally designed changed over time. Maintaining alignment required adaptive leadership and often informal relationship management beyond formal governance structures.

3.3 FUNDING TIMESCALES AND SUSTAINABILITY

CPP funding provided multi-year stability compared to many arts programmes. However, long-term sustainability in rural and coastal contexts remains structurally fragile.

Seed's model encouraged tapering support and capacity building. Yet local volunteer energy is finite, and many community leaders operate alongside paid employment and caring responsibilities. The cost-of-living crisis intensified pressure on both individuals and small organisations.

This surfaced a broader reality. Rural and coastal districts often lack anchor cultural institutions with the balance sheet, staffing and governance depth required for certain funding models. Expecting them to function as urban equivalents can create strain.

3.4 ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN AND PROPORTIONALITY

Compliance, reporting and monitoring requirements were necessary and largely well managed. However, for small community partners and freelance artists, the administrative burden could feel disproportionate.

Seed provided central support, but the tension between creative experimentation and bureaucratic accountability remained present. For grassroots leaders new to cultural funding systems, risk assessments, contracts and financial reporting could feel intimidating.

While these processes protect public investment, they can inadvertently narrow participation to those already comfortable with institutional frameworks unless adequate support is resourced.

3.5 VISIBILITY AND EXPECTATION

As Seed grew more visible, expectations increased. Residents began to anticipate regular activity. Partners were approached for support beyond funded capacity. Success generated demand.

At the same time, CPP is time limited. Managing the narrative of growth alongside the reality of programme cessation requires careful (ongoing) communication. The risk at sunset is that visibility drops abruptly, creating a perception of withdrawal.

This tension reflects a structural issue within time-bound regeneration funding. Short to medium-term investment can catalyse energy, but without follow-on infrastructure the continuity of momentum is uncertain.

3.6 CULTURAL ENTITLEMENT AND TRUST

Although many residents engaged enthusiastically, trust in institutions remains uneven in parts of Sedgemoor. Seed mitigated this by working through familiar spaces and known individuals. However, building cultural entitlement is slow work.

The evaluation evidences high satisfaction and repeat engagement. It also indicates that for some communities, confidence to initiate independently remains emergent rather than fully embedded. This is not a deficit of residents. It reflects historic underinvestment and broader socio-economic pressures.

In summary, Seed functioned within structural realities that shaped what could be achieved. Some of these constraints remain present in Sedgemoor's landscape. Recognising them clearly is not pessimistic. It is necessary for designing future work that is realistic, proportionate and context-sensitive.

Section 4 reflects on what became clearer through exploring the Place Partnership route and what that process revealed about system readiness and local conditions.



4. LEARNING FROM THE PLACE PARTNERSHIP EXPLORATION

In its final phase, Seed explored the development of a Place Partnership proposal focused on young and emerging artists along the Somerset Coast.

The draft proposal, titled 'Next Wave', marked a clear strategic departure from Seed's CPP delivery to date. It proposed:

- Expanding the geographic focus beyond Sedgemoor to include coastal communities from Brea to Porlock, with connections towards Radstock
- Shifting from increasing participation among arts low and non-engagers to strengthening career pathways for young and emerging artists aged 16 to 28
- Addressing structural disadvantage in arts education, employment density, transport connectivity and professional infrastructure across coastal Somerset
- Establishing a new consortium to deliver a three-year workforce and progression-focused programme

This direction emerged legitimately from CPP learning. Through six years of delivery, it became increasingly visible that while participation had grown in Sedgemoor, progression routes for young people and early-career artists in rural and coastal Somerset remain underdeveloped. During the later phase of CPP delivery it became clear that neighbouring West Somerset is likely an area of very low arts engagement, although this is largely hidden in available datasets because its participation data is aggregated with Taunton. This insight contributed to Seed's interest in exploring a broader coastal initiative.

The proposal combined support for young and emerging artists with expanded opportunities for participation and audience engagement among under-represented groups, including programmes with partners such as Young Somerset to engage young people not in education, employment or training (NEET). Focused on youth leadership, creative skills, paid placements and coastal connectivity, the concept aligns in principle with Arts Council England's Cultural Communities and Creative People outcomes and is potentially fundable within the right configuration and context.

However, developing the proposal clarified several important distinctions.

CONTINUATION VERSUS DIVERSIFICATION

The Place Partnership concept represented diversification rather than continuation.

Seed's CPP remit has been to increase engagement and participation among those historically identified as low or non-engagers within Sedgemoor. The proposed Place Partnership shifted towards workforce development, creative career pipelines and cross-district infrastructure.

Both are legitimate cultural priorities. They are not the same.

The exploration made clear that addressing structural barriers for young and emerging artists would require a different institutional positioning, potentially different leadership configuration and a mandate explicitly centred on sector development rather than audience engagement.

This distinction matters. Strategic evolution must be intentional rather than incidental.

GEOGRAPHY AND LEGITIMACY

The draft proposal expanded the working geography significantly. Moving beyond Sedgemoor altered both scale and governance implications.

Seed's credibility has been built through place-based delivery within a defined district. Extending across multiple coastal areas with differing local authority contexts, data profiles and cultural strategies would require a new framework of accountability and representation.

The exploration clarified that place-based legitimacy depends on clarity of geography and mandate. Crossing boundaries is possible, but it cannot be assumed to be a straightforward extension of existing work.

STRUCTURAL NEED VERSUS ORGANISATIONAL VEHICLE

The most important learning is conceptual.

CPP delivery surfaced a structural gap for young and emerging artists along the Somerset Coast. That insight remains valid. It is evidenced in the draft proposal's analysis of education pipelines, employment density, transport barriers and under-investment.

However, identifying a structural need does not automatically determine which organisation, at which moment, should address it.

The Place Partnership exploration clarified that while the idea itself has merit, progression would require:

- Explicit sector-wide alignment around leadership and mandate
- Clear differentiation from existing Place Partnership and NPO activity in the region
- Confidence that the proposed consortium structure matched the scale of ambition
- Strategic timing within the wider South West funding ecology

These are considerations of sequencing and configuration rather than principle.

WHAT THIS CLARIFIES FOR SEED

The process reinforces several lessons for Seed and its stakeholders:

- CPP has generated intelligence that extends beyond its immediate remit.
- Not all identified gaps must be addressed by the same programme.
- Strategic shifts of geography or target group require explicit repositioning.
- Workforce development and audience development, while connected, operate under different logics.

The non-progression of this specific proposal should therefore be understood as a moment of clarification rather than rejection.

The need articulated in 'Next Wave' does not disappear. The research assembled, the structural analysis undertaken and the partnership conversations initiated remain part of the region's cultural intelligence.

The exploration ultimately suggested that while the need articulated through the Next Wave concept remains real and potentially fundable, addressing it may require a different vehicle rather than transitioning Seed itself into a new Place Partnership consortium. In this sense, the exercise clarified both the existence of the need and the importance of carefully considering the most appropriate organisational structure through which it might be addressed.



5. WHAT FEELS TRANSFERABLE

As the Seed Creative People and Places programme reaches the end of its funded period, the programme structure concludes, while the learning generated through it remains. The insight generated through its delivery does not. Across hubs, commissions, governance negotiations and strategic exploration, certain principles and practices have proven effective in Sedgemoor’s rural and coastal context. These are not tied to a single funding stream. They can travel, provided they are applied with clarity of mandate and intent.

START WITH RELATIONSHIP, NOT PROGRAMME

One of Seed’s most consistent strengths has been relational groundwork. Time invested in conversations, informal meetings, shared spaces and listening was not peripheral to delivery. It was foundational.

Projects that grew from existing relationships developed stronger local ownership and resilience. In Highbridge, initiatives such as Blues in the Pews and Highbridge Youth Arts emerged from local energy that Seed supported rather than imposed.

Transferable insight: allocate time and resource for relational development before scale. Treat conversation and trust-building as core work, not preparatory work.

WORK AT HUMAN SCALE

In a dispersed geography, human scale matters. Concentrating energy in defined localities generated visible impact and momentum. The hub approach demonstrated that depth in one place can create confidence and repeat participation.

This does not preclude wider ambition. It suggests that growth is strongest when built from identifiable local anchors rather than spread thinly across a large territory without sustained presence.

Transferable insight: depth and clarity of focus are often more effective than breadth, particularly in rural and coastal contexts.

COMBINE EXCELLENCE WITH ACCESSIBILITY

Seed consistently paired professional artistic ambition with open access. High production values did not deter participation. They increased pride and expectation.

The experience in Sedgemoor challenges the assumption that widening participation requires lowering artistic ambition. Excellence and accessibility are not opposites. When barriers such as cost, location and confidence are reduced, ambitious work can flourish in everyday spaces.

Transferable insight: maintain artistic integrity while actively removing practical and psychological barriers to engagement.

MAKE ACTIVITY VISIBLE

Visibility altered perception. Programming in shopping centres, churches, pubs and front gardens made culture present in everyday life. This normalised participation and signalled that arts and creativity belonged in Sedgemoor.

In areas historically labelled as low engagement, visibility functions as invitation. It counters narratives of absence.

Transferable insight: programme in public and familiar spaces wherever possible to reduce psychological distance from participation.

PROVIDE SCAFFOLDING, NOT CONTROL

Community leaders and artists valued Seed's ability to provide infrastructure without over-directing. Administrative support, safeguarding frameworks and funding access were present, but local voices shaped content and direction.

This light-touch scaffolding model strengthened capability. Individuals gained experience in programming, budgeting, marketing and governance without being subsumed into a centralised structure.

Transferable insight: enable others to lead by reducing bureaucratic fear and providing shared infrastructure where needed.

BUILD SUSTAINABILITY INTENTIONALLY

Seed's tapered support model demonstrated that sustainability requires planning from the outset. Volunteer-led initiatives benefit from phased withdrawal rather than abrupt transition.

However, sustainability should not be confused with permanence of structure. In Sedgemoor's context, long-term resilience may depend on shared infrastructure, collaborative networks and realistic expectations about scale.

Growth is possible. Diversification is possible. Workforce development is possible. Each requires explicit mandate, shared confidence and appropriate configuration.

Transferable insight: design exit and transition strategies early, and ensure ambition is matched by clarity of role and resource.

DISTINGUISH PARTICIPATION FROM SECTOR DEVELOPMENT

CPP delivery has primarily focused on widening participation and building cultural confidence among those historically identified as low or non-engagers. The Place Partnership exploration clarified that sector workforce development and creative career progression represent a related but distinct field of work.

Both are important. They operate through different funding logics, partnership models and accountability structures.

Future initiatives in Sedgemoor may choose to focus on participation, progression or a carefully structured combination of the two. What matters is that the purpose is explicit and the institutional configuration fits that purpose.

Transferable insight: clarity of mandate strengthens credibility and increases the likelihood of sustained impact.

RETAIN THE NARRATIVE SHIFT

Perhaps the most enduring transferable element is narrative.

Residents have experienced ambitious cultural work locally. Young people have performed and programmed. Community leaders have delivered successful events. National partners have worked in Bridgwater. Pride has been expressed publicly. The evaluation evidences strong satisfaction and appetite for continuation.

These are no longer hypothetical claims. They are precedents.

The risk at transition is amnesia. The opportunity is consolidation.

Partners can actively reference what has been achieved when speaking to funders, councillors, businesses and residents. They can draw on documented evidence of participation growth, first-time engagement and community pride. They can use Seed's experience as proof that sustained, participatory and ambitious cultural work is viable in this district.

Seed does not leave behind a single institution to carry everything forward. It leaves a distributed ecology with increased confidence, practical experience and clearer understanding of structural conditions.

The task now is not replication. It is intentional continuation, adaptation or reconfiguration, undertaken with clarity about purpose, geography and role.

Section 6 reflects on what feels important to name at this point of transition.

6. CLOSING REFLECTIONS

The Seed Creative People and Places programme is now reaching the end of its funded period. Its learning remains. The question now sits with partners and organisations across Sedgemoor about what elements of this learning they may wish to carry forward in their own future work, whether individually or through new or continuing collaborations.

Over its CPP funded period, Seed demonstrated that cultural participation in Sedgemoor is not constrained by lack of interest or imagination. It is shaped by infrastructure, geography, confidence and opportunity. When barriers were reduced and invitation was visible, people came. When local leaders were trusted and supported, they led. When artistic ambition was brought into everyday spaces, it was welcomed.

At this juncture, it is important to name both achievement and incompleteness.

Seed has not resolved the structural challenges of working in a dispersed rural and coastal district. Transport remains limited. Volunteer capacity remains finite. Organisational resource remains stretched. Cultural infrastructure is still uneven. These conditions sit beyond the reach of any single programme.

However, measurable and experiential shifts have occurred.

Residents in Highbridge have organised festivals. Young people have performed and programmed. Musicians have formed new collaborations. National institutions have worked in Bridgwater. First-time participants have returned. And it's worth repeating - pride has been expressed publicly. Independent evaluation evidences strong satisfaction and appetite for continued cultural opportunity.

These are not abstract outcomes. They are precedents:

- Evidence that there is sustained demand for both traditional and contemporary arts in Sedgemoor.
- A cohort of local organisers, artists and volunteers with practical delivery experience.
- Strengthened relationships across churches, pubs, town councils, community groups and businesses.
- Clearer understanding of what funding models, governance structures and partnership configurations align with local conditions.
- A narrative of possibility that is now grounded in lived experience.

It does not leave behind a permanent institution tasked with carrying all of this forward. Instead, it leaves a distributed network of organisations and individuals with increased confidence and clearer strategic understanding.

The future need not replicate the structure of Seed in order to retain its intelligence. Participation work, sector development work, local initiatives and cross-district collaborations may all emerge in different forms. What matters is that they are undertaken with clarity of mandate, realistic assessment of capacity and attentiveness to place.

‘Pivot’ does not diminish what has been achieved. It defines it.

Seed has demonstrated that sustained, participatory and ambitious co-created cultural work is viable in Sedgemoor. It has clarified both enabling conditions and structural limits. It has shown what is possible when resource, trust and time are combined.

This paper has sought to retain that clarity so that the end of one funded programme does not mean the loss of its learning.

What follows will be shaped by those who continue to live and work in Sedgemoor’s cultural and civic landscape. The foundations now exist for informed choices about the future of cultural work in Sedgemoor, built on the experience, relationships and confidence developed through the programme.

PERSONAL NOTE FROM THE CRITICAL FRIEND

I have worked alongside Seed Sedgemoor as Critical Friend during a period of ambition, pressure, uncertainty and genuine achievement. It has been a privilege to witness the programme from both inside and outside, to support its strategic thinking, and to observe how it has evolved in response to context rather than theory alone.

From the outset, what struck me most was the seriousness with which partners took their responsibility to place. Seed was never treated as a grant to be spent. It was treated as a commitment to Sedgemoor. That commitment was visible in the hours invested beyond contract, in the careful attention to local nuance, and in the willingness to have difficult conversations about governance, sustainability and risk.

In my role, I have seen the programme's strengths and its tensions. I have observed the confidence that grew in Highbridge and Bridgwater. I have seen artists and community leaders step into roles they might not previously have imagined for themselves. I have also seen the strain placed on small organisations navigating complex systems while holding local trust.

Importantly, Seed has generated clarity. The exploration of a Place Partnership model, although it did not proceed, was not a misstep. It was a rigorous test of readiness. It demonstrated maturity to assess capacity honestly rather than pursue growth for its own sake. That decision, in my view, reflects responsible stewardship of both public funding and community expectation.

As Critical Friend, my perspective is that Seed's most enduring contribution is not any single project. It is the shift in narrative and confidence that participation in arts and culture in Sedgemoor is both legitimate and desired. The independent evaluation evidences reach and satisfaction. What it cannot fully quantify is the accumulation of small moments of pride, surprise and connection that have altered local perception.

CPP cessation inevitably brings a sense of loss. Yet it also brings definition. Seed has clarified what works in this district, what is structurally difficult, and where ambition must be carefully calibrated to capacity. That clarity is an asset.

My hope is that partners will resist the temptation to view the end of the programme as a withdrawal of possibility. The relationships, skills and experience built over these years remain in Sedgemoor. They now sit within organisations, communities and individuals who have evidence of what they can achieve together.

It has been an honour to accompany this work. I leave it with respect for the honesty with which partners have approached both opportunity and limitation, and with confidence that the intelligence generated through Seed will continue to inform cultural life in the district in ways that may not always be visible, but will be meaningful.

Dr Cara Courage
Critical Friend to Seed Sedgemoor

