

# Creative Place Review Helmsdale

29 February 2016

Education Scotland in partnership with Creative Scotland undertook three reviews of Creative Place Award winners in late 2015. The Creative Place Awards recognise communities where people work together to celebrate and promote their town, village or area through the arts and culture. Creative Scotland and three Creative Place winners Peebles, Kilmarnock and Helmsdale wished to have an objective evaluation of their impacts and outcomes. Each organisation produced a self-evaluation and engaged in dialogue with HM Inspectors as part of the process. In each of the reviews inspection teams visited a wide range of provision. At the end of the review week HM Inspectors reported the findings to those involved. These reports will publish at the end of February 2016.

In Helmsdale culture, heritage, arts organisations and community groups are an integral and valued part of a vibrant community. A rich programme of cultural activities is improving lives and the organisation 'Timespan' is of significant economic benefit to the local community. Innovative and creative use of technology is enhancing wellbeing and learning. HM Inspectors suggest they also celebrate and market the rich and diverse artistic, cultural and heritage offer in Helmsdale.

## 1. Context

Helmsdale is situated on the northern edge of coastal east Sutherland. The village of Helmsdale, where most of the population of 842 live, is on the main road north. It has a remote, rural economy with many jobs being low paid and seasonal. The local primary school has around 50 pupils. Secondary age pupils travel daily to school in Golspie, south of Helmsdale. Helmsdale is classed as one of Europe's most fragile communities that is vulnerable to decline due to its remoteness, youth migration and an ageing population.

Helmsdale was awarded a Creative Place Award in recognition of the vibrancy of the community, its unique heritage and track record of contemporary arts activity. Timespan is a cultural centre that includes a museum, archive, gallery, shop and café and was the lead agency in securing the award. At Timespan areas of work are established annually under the concept of *North*, their curatorial framework. Timespan opened 30 years ago and has developed into the main contemporary art, archive and heritage venue in the region.

## 2. How has this creative place impacted on the lives of residents and visitors?

The Creative Place Award (CPA) increased the profile of Helmsdale and widened the local cultural offer. All of the aims were achieved. Together Timespan and a wide range of local community groups ensure Helmsdale is a vibrant, creative place. Helmsdale has a small but dynamic population including artists, creative workers and volunteers who, alongside Timespan, enable culture, heritage and the arts to be woven into everyday life for both local people and visitors. Artist residencies, funded through the CPA, improve the confidence, knowledge and skills of local people. The music residency supported all children at Helmsdale Primary School to contribute to composing new music. This experience still makes them feel proud and has enhanced their belief in their own creativity and their willingness to try new activities. The craft residency raised awareness of how everyday activities such as baking and sewing form part of Helmsdale's rich 'making' culture. Local people improved their creative writing skills as part of the writing residency and the writing group which developed as a result.

Timespan staff and board members are largely successful in meeting their, often ambitious, aims and objectives. Visitor numbers at Timespan have gradually increased over the last three years from 11,138 in 2013 to 13,796 in 2015. Museum visits increased by 25% during 2015. Timespan deliver a diverse programme of exhibitions, workshops and residencies annually which significantly increase the variety of cultural opportunities for both the local community and visitors. Children and young people from across the wider region gain insight into local, Highland and Scottish heritage and exposure to contemporary art through school visits to Timespan. Timespan's approach to digital technology, including a new app and the virtual space, are recognised by visitors of all ages as a highly innovative way to open doors to heritage. Visitors from across the globe find out more about their family history through Timespan archive services thus increasing their sense of belonging. Exhibitions, such as the recent Joseph Beuys show, provide visitors with access to high quality art, stimulate debate and attract audiences from a wide area. Pop up stalls are used effectively at events like the Helmsdale Regatta to reach and inform a wider audience about Helmsdale's past. There is a need to increase the role community members play in shaping the future of Timespan. This would enhance integration with the local community and increase understanding of Timespan's wider regional role.

Cultural opportunities increase participants' confidence, wellbeing and learning. Cultural activities, often delivered through community groups, support vulnerable people to be included and feel valued. The Community Remembrance Day commemorations involving the primary school, local Heritage Committee and the *Woodies*, a local woodlanders group, increased

children's understanding of family, local and global history and how they inter-connect. Young people, who take part in regional music activities such as the Sutherland Youth Pipe Band, develop their music skills, gain confidence and increase their self-esteem. Local heritage and the natural environment are used effectively to engage residents of all ages in learning through activities ranging from archaeological digs to the local rowing and boat building group. Adults gain skills and improve their wellbeing through participation in the *Woodies* group. For a few members this group has been life changing, supporting them to address health challenges they face. Talks, both within Timespan and in other local venues, celebrate and increase awareness of the area's heritage. Participants in knitting groups increase their social connections and sense of achievement through projects such as creating panels for the Scottish Diaspora Tapestry.

Whilst children and adults have access to diverse cultural activities there is scope for partners to work together to increase the more limited local cultural offer for young people. There is a need to support young people to play an active role in shaping the future of cultural opportunities across Helmsdale. Young people would benefit from local secondary schools increasing their partnership with Timespan and cultural community groups to enrich the curriculum across a range of learning and subjects.

### **3. How has this creative place impacted on the artistic and local community?**

Helmsdale has a thriving community of organisations and local groups which enrich the lives of residents. Culture and community are closely aligned within Helmsdale with many community groups making no distinction between them. Skilled, motivated, pro-active creative workers and volunteers enhance the cultural offer across Helmsdale and the wider area. Staff, artists and volunteers at Timespan have sustained its strong cultural presence in the Helmsdale district for 30 years. Timespan staff, archive volunteers, artists and Geeks in Residence are valued, motivated and supported effectively to increase their expertise. Volunteers are an important part of the success of Timespan as a community and regional venue. The Board of Timespan and their operational committees bring a wealth of professional experience which increases the viability of the organisation. Developing the distinct remits and roles of current and potential volunteers would support them to fully contribute as part of the Timespan team.

Across Helmsdale, artists, volunteers and community activists are skilled, energetic and confident to develop new cultural activities. Volunteers are effective in running and raising funds for a wide range of local community events throughout the year. Helmsdale Highland Games, run by volunteers, brings the community together and increases community pride. The visual arts event *Force Fire* held at the Highland Games as part of the CPA introduced contemporary art to a wider audience in an exciting and accessible way. Annual events organised primarily by volunteers increase social cohesion. Storytelling at the Halloween event encourages children to be creative and take pleasure in performance and arts. Cultural activities also contribute to health and wellbeing of local people. Day trips to cultural venues run by local volunteers enable older adults with health challenges to be motivated, included and active. Improving the clarity of routes into volunteering and leadership would increase the long term sustainability of the cultural offer in the area. There is a need to jointly celebrate the significant contribution volunteers make to Helmsdale as a creative place.

Informal networks and connections across Helmsdale support those involved in both the cultural and more general life of the village and surrounding area to share and develop ideas. Skilled and experienced creative workers and volunteers are often inspired by each other's enterprises. The large number of creative groups supported by the community and the diverse range of national and international art available through Timespan's exhibitions, workshops and talks provides artists with the opportunity to reflect on and share their work. The CPA Serendipitous North programme identified creative connections that exist in Helmsdale and highlighted the

many ways the community contributes to the diverse cultural network. This has further supported informal networking between artists. Artlands North, the digital community of northern artists and makers, highlights the work of artists and crafters north of the Caledonian Canal and increases the number of visitors to their studios and workshops.

Culture and in particular Timespan is vital to the local economy. Timespan is not only a local creative hub but a well-recognised venue attracting visitors from across Scotland and the world. Timespan ensures Helmsdale is a tourist destination. Bus parties visiting the museum and gallery have increased in recent years. Timespan also creates local jobs, currently employing 12 people and engaging over 30 volunteers. Local heritage trails and the recent local addition to the *North Coast 500 route* increase interest in and visitor numbers to Helmsdale and East Sutherland. Community groups also play a part in ensuring culture, heritage, crafts and arts support the local economy. The local rowing club builds traditional boats which they competitively row in regattas around the Moray Firth and further afield. Their popular regatta increased interest and visits to Helmsdale harbour contributing to the economic wellbeing of the area. Local leaders, creative workers and the Timespan team have a wealth of business, creative and community skills. There is scope to add value to Helmsdale's economic and social future through more systematically sharing expertise to jointly build and sustain the cultural offer that supports local employment.

#### **4. How has this creative place improved partnership working and informed the wider creative community?**

Timespan builds partnerships and networks nationally and internationally. It is well represented on national and international forums increasing both awareness of Timespan and its influence on wider practice. *Connected North* and the *58 Degree North* programme have increased opportunities to share knowledge and best practice across villages and creative organisations in different countries. The effective archival research methodology used in the *Where We Live* street research programme is shared with other organisations.

Organisations and community groups are positive about working together to improve outcomes. Across Helmsdale and the wider area there are many examples of informal partnerships sharing skills, expertise and resources to enhance cultural programmes and community life. Early years literacy activities and services are delivered by the library at the local primary school, leading to enhanced participation. The Timespan archive team, board members and volunteers from the Historical Railway Project worked together to renovate the station and source and create materials for the historical display which attracts and provides information to visitors. Dementia Friendly Communities, Eden Court Theatre and local schools are developing a history and reminiscence project about Helmsdale to support the inclusion, esteem and wellbeing of older adults. Partners use new technology innovatively to increase the cultural offer and reach new audiences. Timespan and St Andrews University work together effectively to develop adventurous new ways to enhance the digital experience of both visitors to the centre and the online audience. This enables increasing numbers of people to access and understand the heritage of the region. *Dementia Friendly Communities* with NHS Highland funding are piloting an arts therapy programme using interactive smart screens and tablets to increase the health and wellbeing of adults with dementia. Although at an early stage it is overcoming barriers of the remote location by enabling local people to engage with the Arts Therapist based in Inverness.

The growth of Helmsdale as a cultural and community centre is inhibited by lack of support to build capacity, recruit volunteers and facilitate partnership working. Helmsdale would benefit from partners, including public services, community groups and third sector organisations, exploring how these community development needs can be met. This could help develop a

shared vision for culture in Helmsdale building on the existing Helmsdale priorities established by the Development Trust and individual organisations' plans. There is a need to jointly capture the impact culture has on the local community in terms of inclusion, employment, health and education in order to sustain and further develop successful cultural projects.

Timespan's website is clear, accessible and an effective promotion tool. The venue is also clearly promoted in tourist information produced by the Highland Museums Forum. Individually partner organisations and groups use a variety of communication tools to market what is available. A joint approach to marketing, using tools such as social media, websites, local media and community noticeboards, would enhance how well both local people and visitors understand and access the cultural and community offer.

### **The review of Helmsdale Creative Place found the following key strengths.**

- Culture, heritage, arts organisations and community groups are an integral and valued part of this vibrant community.
- A rich programme of cultural activities that improve lives.
- Culture, and in particular Timespan, is of significant economic benefit to the local community.
- Innovative and creative use of technology that enhances wellbeing and learning.

### **We discussed with partners how they might continue to improve their work. This is what we agreed with them.**

- Building on existing strengths and assets develop a shared vision to grow Helmsdale as a creative place.
- Jointly celebrate and market the rich and diverse artistic, cultural and heritage offer in Helmsdale.

## **5. What happens at the end of the review?**

We are satisfied with the overall quality of provision. We are confident that Timespan and partners can build on and take forward the key recommendations of this report. We will make no further evaluative visits in connection with this review.

Alona Murray  
**HM Inspector**  
29 February 2016

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### **Creative Scotland**

Waverley Gate  
2 - 4 Waterloo Place  
Edinburgh EH1 3EG

**T** +44 (0) 845 603 6000  
**E** [enquiries@creativescotland.com](mailto:enquiries@creativescotland.com)

[www.creativescotland.com](http://www.creativescotland.com)



ALBA | CHRUTHACHAIL

### **Education Scotland**

Denholm House  
Almondvale Business Park  
Almondvale Way  
Livingston EH54 6GA

**T** +44 (0)131 244 3900  
**E** [enquiries@educationscotland.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@educationscotland.gov.uk)

[www.educationscotland.gov.uk](http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk)

