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**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**



HEARD

YOUR VOICE MATTERS
in LUTON

What was HEARD?

We invited people in the Luton Road area of Chatham to explore the possibilities for an artwork in their neighbourhood. We wanted their ideas to be HEARD.

As part of the Medway Creative Health project, Ideas Test had been tasked with commissioning a public realm artwork. We wanted to hear from the community how this could benefit their area.

We wanted to listen. We wanted them to be HEARD.

Where we went from there was unknown at the beginning of the project. Listening first, then acting.



HEARD was produced
by Senior Producer
Wayne Parsons





Why we did it?

Creative Health Medway Place Partnership Programme

In 2024, Medway Council received investment from Arts Council England to deliver the programme. Running over 18 months, the programme was designed to:

- Build the skills and confidence of artists and arts organisations to deliver high-quality creative health work
- Test new approaches and forge new partnerships across health, community and creative sectors
- Lay the foundations for creative health to become a permanent, sustainable part of how Medway supports its communities



Phase One: Inspiration and Imagination

Ideas Test brought together 34 residents for a series of gatherings at a local social club.

There was live music. Food from a local restaurant. A free night out with good company that also happened to be a conversation about the future of the neighbourhood.

The central question on the table was deliberately open:

What change do you want to see?



How we started



To help inspire thinking about what might be possible, we invited artists who had worked on community-led public projects to share their work. We wanted to set imaginations alight and demonstrate that a public commission doesn't have to mean a bronze statue or a mural. It can be a garden, a sound installation, a democratic experiment, or a dance performance.

It can be just about anything.

So what was decided

Three themes were identified by the community as priorities for us to focus on with this project:

The Litter Problem. It was described as demoralising and ubiquitous.

Youth Provision A need for a proper youth centre and skills classes.

A Multicultural Event Something to celebrate the richness of Luton's diverse food, music, and dance.

We discussed as a team where we could best help with the public realm commission we were bringing to the area.

We decided to focus on the litter problem, tackling it creatively to address the deeper sense that the area wasn't being looked after.



James the Scribe in action documenting the meet ups through his amazing scribes.

You can find the full booklet [here](#)

Time to plan

Our task was clear. We needed a project that was

- Something that helped the community with flytipping and litter
- Something that had a creative approach
- Something that had a focus on health and well-being
- Something that results in a piece of art for Luton

Looking to Bogota for clues on how to deliver

Antanas Mockus, as mayor of Bogotá, Colombia (1995–1997, 2001–2003), famously replaced corrupt traffic police with 420 mime artists to manage traffic and educate drivers.

Using mockery, humor, and nonverbal performance, the mimes reduced traffic fatalities by over 50%, proving that citizens feared public ridicule more than fines.

This creative approach is often cited as a successful example of using art and civic engagement to transform public behavior and improve city governance.



A Bogotá mayor shocked everyone by **appointing mimes at busy intersections**, using silent humor instead of **fines to make roads safer**.

[*Knowledge Junction, Facebook](#)

The Result

Phase Two: The Community in Action

Litter Picks with a Twist

We led fortnightly litter picks. These were not your normal litter picks; we were accompanied by a world-champion beatboxer, Rupert Oldridge.

The sessions became social events. Beyond the physical exercise, these picks acted as a catalyst for conversation; when you are visible and purposeful on the street, people stop to talk.



Click on the image to see our litter picks in action

Creative Workshops in Schools

Along with the brilliant Rupert Oldridge, we visited two schools in Luton. Luton Primary and Phoenix Primary School.



Together, we delivered eight workshops to do two things:

- To teach young people how to beatbox
- Record the children's messages about littering and the environment.

The sounds and beatboxing rhythms we captured in those workshops feature in interactive bins installed just outside their school.

This ensured that when kids used the bins, they heard their own voices, reinforcing their sense of belonging.

The Talking Bins

Seven bins on Luton Road were transformed into something extraordinary. We wanted to find a way of incentivising the use of the bins on Luton Road in a playful way.

The bins were designed and built by Thor McIntyre-Burnie of Aswarm — one of the artists who had presented to the community in Phase One, whose work on sound and sculpture in public spaces had inspired the room.

Installed in partnership with Norse and Medway Council's Waste Team, some of the bins responded when people used them — playing messages from local children, including 'thank-yous' and messages about litter and pollution.

We wanted to spark conversations, make people smile, and turn a mundane act into something more conscious.



The Stats - Environment and Health

Rubbish removed	219.53 kg – across 9 sessions
Distance walked	27.13 km – Chatham to Maidstone and back (almost)
Steps taken	29,922 steps across the whole programme
Calories burned	~428 per session – the equivalent of a spin class
Resident conversations	390 chats with people living or working on Luton Road
Biggest single session	3 December 2025 – 97 conversations in one evening

What people said

"You are doing something great here. Good on you. Thank you."

"I would like to join something like this. I have kids and the park is always filthy."

"Love the beatboxing, it draws people in."

"I heard you and I was like I want you to do that again... you got a lot of smiles out there today."

"I see the effect of what you are doing. You made the day for my son. Thank you for encouraging him."

"That is wicked. I was having a look and thinking I have never seen this before."

"The problem is there are not enough bins on Luton Road — there is nowhere to put your rubbish."



Getting attention



Bin installs were featured on KMTV. We were joined by the Luton Ward Councilors, Medway Council, and Thor from Aswarm



Talking bins featured on BBC News



We had three separate interviews across a day on BBC Radio Kent

BBC RADIO
Kent

The Legacy

Health

Engagement in the litter picks yielded measurable physical health benefits for participants, as evidenced by project data.

Feedback highlighted a profound social impact, with residents reporting feeling more cared for and valued by the presence of a dedicated community group.

Participants reported a significantly increased sense of pride and ownership over their immediate local environment.

Advocacy

We facilitated a direct consultation between the core litter pickers and the Council's waste department, ensuring resident observations reached key decision-makers.

The core group has successfully transitioned into an independent community collective, establishing a self-led, regular litter-picking schedule along Luton Road.

Residents provided actionable feedback on fly-tipping and dog waste, while identifying critical software bugs in the Council's reporting system to help improve local service efficiency.

Well-being

By actively addressing fly-tipping and litter, we helped reduce the daily anxiety and mental fatigue associated with living in a neglected urban environment.

We fostered a sense of belonging and mutual support that extended beyond the formal activities of the litter picks.

Shifting from passive observers to active problem-solvers provided a significant boost to participants' confidence. This sense of agency—the belief that they can effect change in their own lives and surroundings—is a cornerstone of long-term psychological wellbeing.



The Challenges

Seasonal Barriers

We all know it's cold in the winter. Our timeline dictated that the litter picks were happening over Nov-Feb. While we maintained a dedicated core team of six committed residents, converting initial interest into active participation proved difficult; many locals provided contact details during our walks but did not ultimately attend the scheduled picks.



Defining the "Ask" in Co-Creation

We grappled with how to frame our initial consultations. The challenge lay in asking the community what they wanted without knowing the project's final destination. We had to balance an open-ended dialogue with the reality of our parameters as an arts organisation.

The Challenges cont...

Navigating "Unknown"

Our commitment to a co-created approach meant the project's "end state" remained fluid. We faced a two-fold challenge regarding the future of both the community groups and the physical installations. While the outcome was a success—the council and residents opted to keep the talking bins in situ and form an independent litter picking group—managing the uncertainty of these assets from the outset was a complex balancing act.

