

# SUSSEX CO-LAB

## WOVEN LANDSCAPES, CONNECTED THREADS, INTERLACING CULTURE, COMMUNITY AND PLACE

On the 29th May 2025, 80 community groups, creative and participatory practitioners, researchers, representatives from organisations across Sussex and elected representatives celebrated working with communities to transform the places where they live and work.

This document captures guiding principles to working with people and place that emerged through the presentations on the day.

### **OBLIQUITY**

**CHANGE AND MEANING UNFOLD IN UNPLANNED, NON-LINEAR WAYS. LET OUTCOMES EMERGE THROUGH TRUST, VALUES, AND CO-CREATION.**

- Change demands long-term engagement, but funding and governance structures often require short-term outcomes. Navigating this mismatch requires adaptive strategies and sustained relational work.
- Take the time to build, with others, your moral compass in this work. Embedding strong principals will guide you through the tough times, helping you to work through the tensions that will inevitably emerge.
- The impact and value of this way of working often emerges through indirect ways. Commissioners and funders of this work need to be open to working with uncertainty and co-creating outcomes with the communities they are serving.
- Trust the process.

### **VOICE AND BELONGING**

**AGENCY GROWS WHEN PEOPLE FEEL HEARD AND RECOGNISED. ANCHOR ENGAGEMENT IN IDENTITY, PARTICIPATION, AND SHARED PURPOSE.**

- Inclusion means recognising both participation and absence, who is present, who is missing, and why. Everyone's contribution matters, even if it is small or quiet.
- Working creatively in a participatory way with people can develop identity which in turn helps build purpose and belonging.
- Little things matter in a place, the small everyday interactions have the potential to unlock opportunities. See the sum of all parts of the work, not just those reported in formal ways.
- Initiatives and strategies that focus on place-based activities need to meet people where they are, rather than 'shoehorn' them into pre-existing plans. Work together to build outcomes from that starting point.
- A stronger network can amplify the voice of the few.
- Enable people to 'become' through doing.



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## **TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION**

### **CHANGE HAPPENS THROUGH ACTIVE DOING AND MORAL INTENT. ENABLE CHANGE THROUGH DOING, CONNECTING, AND EXCHANGING.**

- Transformative action means getting under the surface, acknowledging layered identities, heritage, needs, and histories, and then resurfacing together. Do not mistake reflection for inaction.
- Creative activities enable the socioeconomic challenges people face to be expressed, explored and supported improving the health and wellbeing of those involved.
- Oral histories and the storytelling that underpins that can build a deeper connection with place and is essential to enable change.
- Working with oral histories can build bridges, working across difference to find connection.
- Knowledge exchange matters. Sharing lived experiences around inclusive practice, impact, communication, problem solving alongside the methods and models being used builds a stronger network. Find ways and means of connecting and sharing.

## **REALISING CIVIC POWER**

### **CO-CREATION BUILDS MORE THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS. WEAVE COLLABORATION INTO STRUCTURES, DIALOGUE, AND VISION.**

- Civic power grows by embracing paradox and imperfection, not glossing over them.
- Nature is not just backdrop, but co-creator, an active partner in shaping place and meaning.
- Build the infrastructure to support deep listening. Move beyond the words to developing meaning and understanding. Create trusted and safe spaces to be heard, to hear diverse voices and to enable debate and discussion around that difference.
- When working with place and the people who live there, think dialogue, think relational not extraction.
- Embrace collective thinking and imagination. Think 'we' not 'I' and see beyond the interest of any one organisation.
- Work together to build a vision for place. Working in a person-centred way can create meaning and understanding, helping people and different groups to see where they belong in bringing that vision to life.
- Working in partnership with others, means learning how to communicate with different audiences. Different language and positioning can change how others see your work. Take the time to get to know your audience; what motivates them, how you might be able to help them and why what you do should matter to them.

### **WORKING WITH OBLIQUITY, INCLUSION, ACTION, AND CIVIC POWER REQUIRES US TO HOLD CERTAIN TENSIONS:**

- Long-term intent versus short-term funding
- Presence versus absence
- Stillness versus action
- Material design versus social purpose
- Human agency versus more-than-human partners

Embracing these tensions is not a weakness of the process. Instead, it is the driving energy behind the work.

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