

Flight: the Chrysalis Collective

August 2021

- **Introduction**

Chrysalis is a co-designed mobile community space for gatherings of all kinds for people, place and planet. It was co-created by the hands, hearts and imagination of hundreds of people living or working in the BioRegion of South Devon during 2017-2019, in collaboration with Encounters Arts, a company of artists, producers, facilitators based in the region.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IGV3Zf8nV2o>

Eighteen months of co-emerging resulted in a highly original, welcoming venue which brings people together. Taking the next step, Encounters set out to share responsibility for the future of the Chrysalis resource. The CCC project explored the potential of a programme of site-specific events and collaborative governance during this next stage of Chrysalis's life, out in the "real world".

Our original aims were to:

- co-design the future usage, governance and ownership of Chrysalis as a shared community asset
- create Flight: the Chrysalis Collective, a group coming out of the making of Chrysalis to explore shared responsibility for the next stage of the Chrysalis programme
- deliver an exploratory phase of the Chrysalis programme initiated by this group.

We also wanted this project to:

- further model and explore Encounters' commitment to consent-based decision-making and creative participation, working in non-hierarchical ways
- iron out technical/practical issues with the Chrysalis vehicle e.g. shared booking system
- identify possible future financial models, thus supporting a potential handover of Chrysalis to the communities who created it.

Work on the making of Chrysalis enabled Encounters to extend a commitment to a non-hierarchical model of working beyond the organisation and out into the communities we work alongside. For Encounters, to co-design the future usage, governance and 'ownership' of Chrysalis as a shared community asset was the inevitable next step on this journey.

Maintaining a community resource like Chrysalis has both benefits and responsibilities. The project set out to test if it would be possible for these to be shared across a group of stakeholders working in a non-hierarchical, consensus-based way.

- **Project Description**

Encounters invited representatives of the communities and organisations involved in creating Chrysalis to 'meet' the completed vehicle and hear about possibilities for its next phase. A creative producer followed this up with a series of extended one to one phone calls. Around 10 of Chrysalis's creators expressed an interest in staying with Chrysalis to explore the formation of Flight together.

In exchange for offering their time to developing the Flight group, potential members were offered access to Chrysalis, with an accompanying artist facilitator, with the usual charges waived. The creative producer planned to coordinate and hold space as Flight began to take shape.

We held a gathering of people potentially interested in forming the Flight collective. To model a way of working, participatory activities at this gathering were co-created

by two community development workers in the fledgling group, alongside the creative producer. The activities acted as 'prompts' to stimulate focused discussions – encouraging people to imagine possible futures and directions, to unpack different priorities and aspirations so that the stakeholders/people in the room could begin to reach beyond Chrysalis as a physical object/enabling space and imagine a next stage of the shared journey. That first Flight gathering generated much enthusiasm but also raised lots of unanswered questions. It felt like the process had begun, but, just a couple of days later Lockdown no.1 came. Without an established centre of gravity for the project, we were knocked sideways.

Chrysalis is a physical resource designed for multisensory, tactile, face-to-face gatherings bringing together people in relation to place. As national restrictions were introduced, Encounters did a risk assessment and reluctantly made the decision to quarantine Chrysalis and suspend bookings.

The vibrant resource at the heart of our project was locked away and unusable, removing our shared purpose. Although we tried to reconvene the fledgling group online, we had not grown roots to form or sustain a collaborative group in a digital space.

We struggled to maintain communication and a sense of momentum over the following year of uncertainty. Meetings online were only attended by three or four of the original 10 people. No Covid-secure activities could be planned with any confidence as the timescale for re-activating Chrysalis remained unknown and ever receding.

- **The Outcomes**

All our worlds changed dramatically at the point of lockdown. Most noticeable was the way that personal and professional boundaries blurred. We were all pulled in many directions and had to re-prioritise; two of the community workers were called on to run food banks rather than cultural events.

We emailed or phoned each other, and/or the creative producer, about issues which - pre-pandemic - would have remained hidden, considered to be personal or domestic. These included childcare, isolation, health, disability, pain and loss. We also shared feelings of inability to meet the high level of need in some of our communities.

For those of us who were able to remain involved in the project, this blurring of boundaries has now become a strength and an opportunity. Letting our personal selves into the project space feels central to the possibility for co-creating change. Approximately half the people/organisations involved in the attempts to establish the Flight Collective got to know each other much better and are likely to go on to work together in the future.

Custodianship of Chrysalis was successfully transferred to Dangerous Dads CIC, one of the community partners fully involved with Chrysalis since its very beginnings. They have taken on the considerable responsibility of looking after the vehicle and its routines - including publicity, bookings, insurance and running costs. Most of the technical and practical issues around regular use of the Chrysalis vehicle are now resolved. Organisations and communities which participated in the co-creating of Chrysalis continue to have priority access to the resource. <https://dangerousdads.org.uk/chrysalis/>

After a long hiatus, Chrysalis community events restarted in spring and summer 2021, including an overnight nature camp for father-figures and children in the South Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and (separately) inviting families on low incomes, with children with additional needs, to gather in the woods and cook healthy food together. Some events were rescheduled, due to Covid-19 self-isolation, and the programme continues into autumn 2021. Highlights will include a 'blue space' rock pooling day for families, in two of the most deprived wards in Devon, who rarely access nearby beaches.

We learned that co-creation needs a shared sense of purpose and it takes time to establish this. We learned that we all have back stories and can't make assumptions about each other. We learned that when we give each other the permission and the safety to bring our full selves to the work exciting possibilities can surface. We

learned that sometimes the circumstances mean that things change more than we could possibly have imagined, but butterflies arise from a process of dormancy and disintegration.

The pandemic brought health and social injustices into high visibility. Anti-racism has emerged as a response to the challenges of our society, in which Chrysalis has a unique opportunity to engage with people in discussion and action that might lead toward change. A timely and much-needed proposal to use Chrysalis as a neutral space to explore anti-racism in South Devon is currently taking shape. This came out the passion and energy of one person alongside an emotional small meeting of just three of us.

Agency was transferred in part, although Flight did not form as a collective in the way we had hoped. Chrysalis is now established as a viable community asset, with great potential as an inside-outside space as we enter what is hopefully a recovery phase of the pandemic.

- **Moving Forward**

Dangerous Dads CIC plan to invite a Chrysalis champion onto their board. This person will speak for the non-hierarchical ways of working for social justice which are implicit in the Chrysalis project and come from the heart of the Chrysalis-Encounters legacy around about people/identity, agency and environment.

Through Dangerous Dads CIC networks, a wider range of partners - including Action for Children, Sovereign Housing in Plymouth and Devon County Council Holiday Activity and Food (HAF) programme - are engaged in developing and delivering Chrysalis activity across communities. This partnership funding model is promising for the future of Chrysalis. Dangerous Dads CIC are currently applying for a Kickstart scheme grant to create a new job of Chrysalis coordinator for a locally based under 25-year-old at risk of long-term unemployment. <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/kickstart-scheme>

A key learning which has come from the project is around combining confidence with compassion. We have learned that change happens and can bring disarray, but at the same time co-creating is possible when we value ourselves and each other, respecting both our strengths and our limits. The pressures and learning from people's experiences through the pandemic refocused individuals' clarity of purpose – a smaller active group has emerged with a person-centred dynamic, integrity and commitment to the aspiration for social justice.

We deeply appreciated the Co-creating Change Commission's flexibility to allow this project to unfold in the time it needed. It will continue to expand in its own time after this case study is written.

Sarah Scaife, creative producer, with input from four colleagues
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