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www.engage.org/journal

Building a new Maindee

Joanne Sutton Maindee Unlimited Trustee

Maindee is a thriving, inner-city commercial and residential area on the central eastern side of Newport, South Wales. It is home to a collection of bakers, bookies, butchers and backstreet boozers that run along its main thoroughfare, Chepstow Road.

At the western end of Chepstow Road you will find Maindee Library: a building that has been at the centre of community life in the area for a long, long time.

Newport City Council ran the ground floor of the building as a library until local authority funding cuts in 2015 forced its closure. Since then, the library has been reopened and run on a voluntary basis as both a library and community space, governed by registered charity (1160272) Maindee Unlimited.

Maindee Unlimited

'Our vision is to transform Maindee into a sustainable community with a strong local identity, strong local economy and a reputation as an attractive, safe,

culturally vibrant and cohesive place to live, learn, relax and work.' Vision statement, Maindee Unlimited

Maindee Unlimited is made up of a group of local residents, traders and partner organisations with a shared vision to build a better Maindee. Our mission is to achieve this through a well-governed organisation, running a broad programme in a range of attractive and safe indoor and outdoor spaces, where new micro businesses, community spirit and social enterprise can flourish.

Finding Maindee is one of the avenues we are pursuing to achieve this goal. It is a three-year arts-led regeneration project, currently in its second year, and is part of the Arts Council of Wales' funding initiative *Ideas: People: Places*. It moves beyond received ideas of urban regeneration, which have largely focused on capital developments, and seeks to find new ways of working and connecting people through creativity and engagement with the arts. In February 2017 we advertised a commission for creative practitioners to work with our key

stakeholders. The purpose was to jointly identify, prioritise and develop creative and design solutions and implement the renovation and improvement of the library building as a flexible and creative space for community use. Our aim is to draw upon the experience, skills and ambitions of said stakeholders: volunteers and local individuals, groups and businesses, to develop Maindee and its library as a space run by and for local people.

Fees and budget

Alongside Arts Council of Wales, additional funding has been acquired through Esmee Fairbairn Foundation, Garfield Weston Charitable Trust, and the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme through Newport City Council. The total project budget for the renovation and improvement of the library building is £215,750, which has been allocated as follows:

Capital spend

- £121,000 for works to the building (most of this budget is/will be allocated to essential works such as heating, etc. but the creative practitioner will work with the LWG to help prioritise spending against this budget and identify ways in which arts/creative approaches may enhance outcomes e.g. design solutions to issues relating to the skylight at the back of the space)
- £24,650 VAT to cover appropriate fees and capital works
- £12,100 contingency based on 10% capital.

Creative and socially engaged practice

- £13,000 creative practitioner design fee (including all travel, presentation and reasonable disbursements)
- £45,000 indicative budget to support arts/creative interventions associated with the refurbishment of the library.

Ideas: People: Places

'We want to explore new ways of working, nurture new partnerships and champion quality in both the design and the execution of projects. These successful projects will, we expect, be those that adopt a thoughtful and creative approach to regeneration – an approach that connects and empowers communities, seeing them as important contributors to the regeneration process.'

Nathalie Camus, Arts Council of Wales

Established in 2014, the aim of *Ideas: People: Places* <http://www.arts.wales/arts-in-wales/ideas-people-places> was to join artists and communities on projects designed to regenerate those areas in an imaginative and ambitious way.

Finding Maindee

Maindee is a place of stories and connections, and we needed to find a way of locating and harnessing those stories and connections. *Ideas: People: Places* allowed us to set up our New Paths Fund, an initiative offering grants to people with imaginative and creative ideas to run exciting projects in Maindee. Applications are received and scrutinised by a panel



made up of Maindee Unlimited volunteers, trustees and staff, and the fund has developed from being a pot of cash at a basic level, to a platform for peer-based mentoring and support, and a tool for offering training and resources, where applicable.

This process has allowed us to explore the physical, psychosocial and geophysical spaces of Maindee with a wide range of artists, and each artist or group has proactively led communication and collaboration

with the wider community through all manner of media. Funded projects have included:

Maindee Stories: The Fabric of our Lives

This was a creative project that involved people from diverse backgrounds working together to produce a large textile artwork, while exploring themes of identity and local history, and celebrating what connects people to a particular place.

A series of workshops were hosted by local artist Marion Cheung <http://marioncheung.blogspot.co.uk>, and over a period of six months contributors embarked on research trips to exhibition spaces and welcomed neighbouring inter-faith groups to enrich the tapestry and overall sense of community spirit.

Painting with the Neighbours

During a week-long, half term holiday, Marega Palsler of Mr & Mrs Clark <http://www.mrandmrsclark.co.uk> 'invited the neighbours around to paint'. Members of the public were invited to express themselves through the medium of colour, collage, sculpture and drawing on a mobile wall placed on Chepstow Road.

Each day was hosted by a different artist, with specialisms in different techniques and approaches to mark making. Each day beckoned neighbours, old and new, to stop, look, paint and talk.

Lloyd Gittins

Inspired by the aforementioned project, local resident and entrepreneur Lloyd Gittins [_hp90customs/](http://hp90customs/) applied to the New Paths Fund.

Lloyd is the founder of Maindee-based [_hp90customs](http://hp90customs/), a brand he has turned from a hobby to a business, customising trainers and other sportswear with a unique painterly technique. Lloyd reached out and shared his personal journey with us, a story of confronting challenges to find something positive: the art of painting has helped him fight

depression and other domestic trials.

Costume & Culture

Self-organised groups Newport SeneGambia Association (NEWSA) and South Wales Hispanic Latina Community (HISLA), both approached Maindee Unlimited with a New Paths project.

NEWSA, a group founded by people of Gambian and Senegalese origin in the west of Africa, focuses on cultural education and hosts socio-cultural events to showcase the cultures and values of West Africa to the wider community. HISLA promotes the harmonious integration between Hispano-Latinos and the local community.

Both groups held workshops in the library, which celebrated costume, cuisine, music and dance, and culminated in a cultural celebration at Maindee Festival <http://www.maindee.org/festival>, the annual, community arts festival from which Maindee Unlimited was built.

Here and now: the creative commission at Maindee Library

The project is about responding to the situation in Maindee to provide a model of best practice for refurbishment based on the people who use the space, marrying the artistic with the functional. It is the single biggest activity within the *Finding Maindee* project and is both exciting and daunting. However, with creative practitioners now in place, we can develop and implement creative design proposals



that build upon our journey so far, which will help shape changes to the future fabric of the building.

This appointment was managed by curatorial agency Addo <http://www.addocreative.com>, who helped us distribute the brief to a wide audience, scrutinise the applications, shortlist potential candidates and interview alongside representatives of the library volunteers, representatives of Arts Council of Wales,

the charity's management board and staff.

The commission is an opportunity to support the main functions of the library as a community-run space, as identified by the core group of centre users at a workshop held earlier in the year. These cover the functional and architectural aspects of the project:

- The need for a better catering service that adheres to Public Protection regulations
- How to maintain the library's book collection and lending systems
- To create private spaces for counselling, the baby clinic or to rent out
- To create playful spaces for both children and events
- To provide a meeting space for public events, workshops and art shows
- The need for accessible toilets and sanitation
- And safe storage for a wide range of equipment.

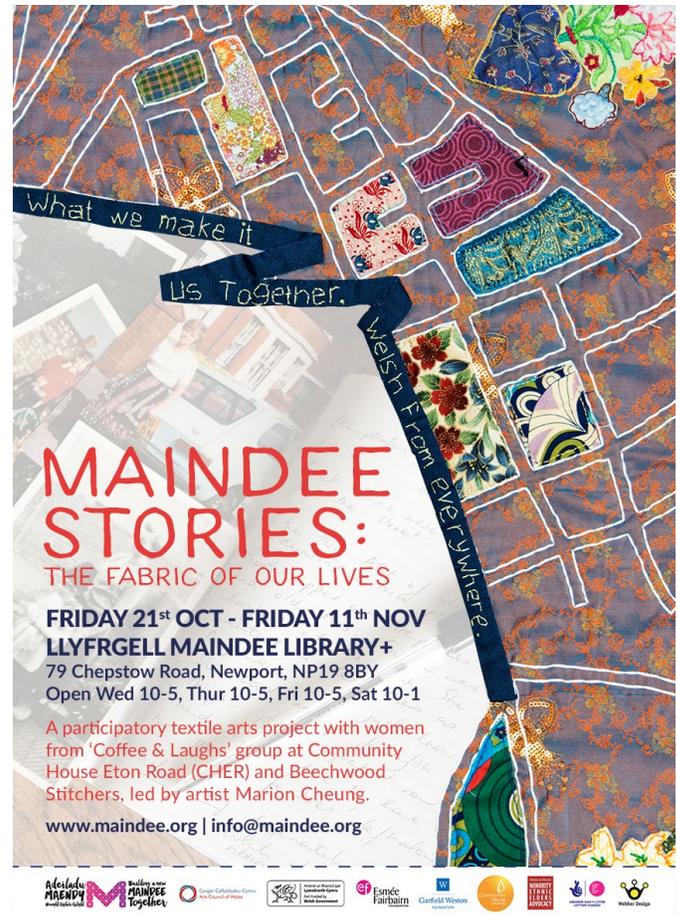
While also exploring socially-engaged approaches to:

- The emerging functions and relationships within the library space
- How a space can be both neutral and flexible
- How the space – and the exterior or welcome to the building – helps to promote and communicate the library as a volunteer-led space
- How to marry the practical function of the building with the more creative.

The architects

We selected the joint practice of George Lovesmith and Sarah Hollingworth (S&G) to work with us on the project, following a competitive interview process – an overwhelming 30 applications were received, with five invited to interview. A lot of thought went into the selection process, all the time questioning ourselves on who this project is designed to support and why.

'This brief brought together long-standing shared





interests in the co-production of whatever can be called public – an approach that aims to collectively build capacities, ownership and better buildings. Our strategy is three-fold: playful provocation, physical enabling, and an invite to collaborate.’ Sarah Hollingworth, S&G

George and Sarah’s approach – in which ideas are

tried and prototyped before being finally implemented – relates well to our project, as it gives the chance for library volunteers and users of the building to test whether proposed ideas can work before taking them further. They also expressed an interest in local stories and narratives, and how these can influence the changes to the fabric of the building. As such, they are looking to set themselves up as curators who manage people’s ideas into

becoming part of the library building.

The learning curve and the legacy

'First we build the tools, then they build us.'
Marshall McLuhan

This project is an enrichment of a public building within a public space, combining aesthetics and practicality, communal maintenance and ownership. In the coming weeks we will be responding to the questions of governance and project management, while continuing to question whom this building and this space is for and how best to serve them.

The project is growing while actively staying fluid and proactive, reflective and responsive – and our funders have joined us in this approach with responsiveness in turn.

Communication has already been a significant part of the process. Quarterly meetings have been held with Arts Council Wales to monitor and support, feedback and reflect. While these discussions have been fraught at times, both parties have used discussion as a form of research and development, feedback and reflection.

As each phase of the project has developed, Maindee Unlimited has been forced to keep in step and develop itself. At the beginning of the project, the management board needed to gain an understanding of the arts, therefore new trustees were sought and appointed. Further skills gaps were

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identified and fortified through the making of valuable and varied connections with outside partners and organisations, from the hyper local level of Chepstow Road to city-wide and national services.

We must continue to nurture the needs of our trusted and longstanding volunteers, without which the library couldn't function. We must continue to support our local traders and retailers through an active *#shoplocal* campaign. After its establishment, Maindee Unlimited must continue to build on an infrastructure based on communication and conversation.

We are not infallible. We are indebted to our volunteers, our neighbours – including local residents, retailers and partner organisations, our funders and future collaborators, and most importantly our community.

By March 2018, the deadline for this project, our hopes for a transformed library building will be realised. But while this date will mark the end of building works at Maindee Library, it is hoped that our wider ambitions for building a new Maindee will continue.



Film: Joanne Sutton, Building a new Maindee.
<https://vimeo.com/233680605/99b0d44f0a>



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<https://vimeo.com/233680974/69ead7eb15>

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