



**‘We didn’t need the book’**

## **Community Libraries Art of Storytelling Project**

**2014-2015**

**Part 1: Summary**

**Birmingham Community Libraries 3**

**Introduction 4**

**Aims and outcomes 5-6**

**Project structure 7**

**Statistical summary: activities 8-9**

**Statistical summary: participants 10-11**

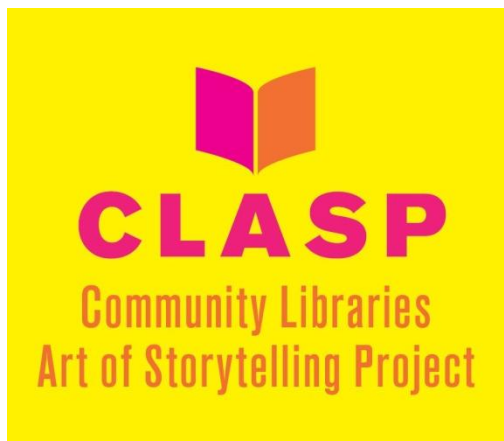
**Summary of Findings 12**

**Summary of Recommendations 13**

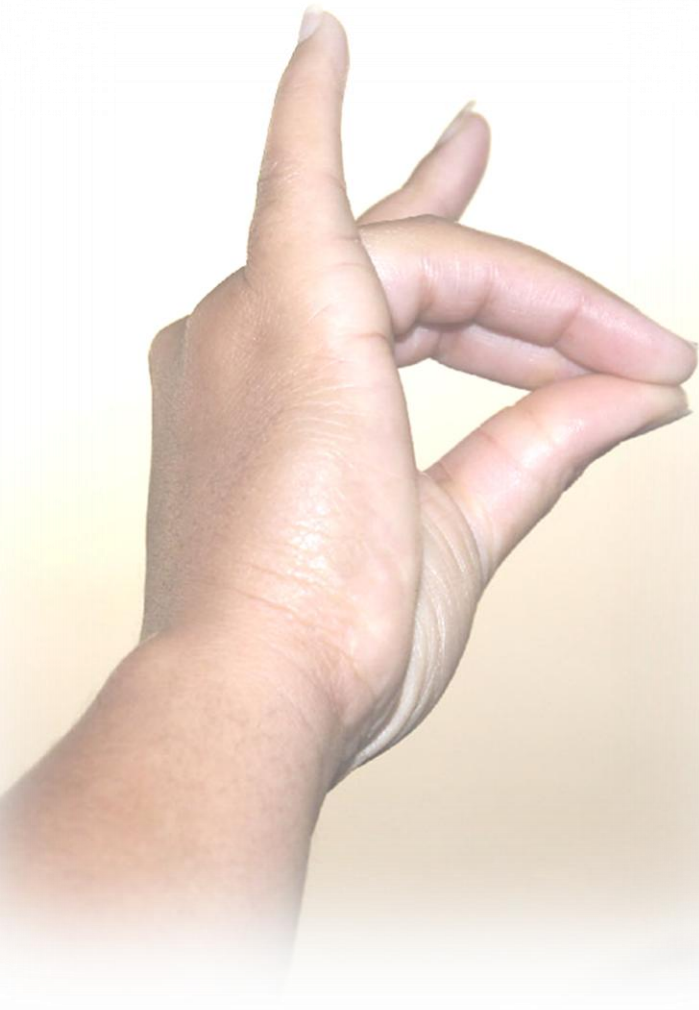
**Methodology 14**

**Map of participating Libraries 15**

**Acknowledgements 16**



# Birmingham Community Libraries



The Community Libraries Support Unit (CLSU) is a relatively new department within Community Libraries. It was created in the summer 2012 with a remit to help develop libraries in Birmingham and to explore opportunities to increase income within the service.

The CLSU were delighted to be successful in their application for funding from the Arts Council England. The idea for CLASP germinated within the CLSU. The objective of the project was close to the CLSU's heart because storytelling has always been at the centre of the cultural offer from our libraries. Utilising Arts Council funds and the skills and talents of local artists, the project provided our staff and members of the public the opportunity to develop and use non-conventional artistic formats, such as dance and rhythm, to transcend language and other barriers and encourage a love of literature in the children and adults who use our libraries.

It has been wonderful to witness the CLASP project provide the platform for our staff and library users to tap into a wellspring of creativity and inspiration which they used, and will continue to use, to deliver enhanced cultural activities within the Birmingham community.

CLSU Team

# Introduction

‘Ofsted would love this !’

*Nursery Teacher, Rep Open  
House performance*

‘This project has given  
all the staff at my Library  
a huge morale boost at a  
time it was badly  
needed. We had 100%  
positive feedback from  
the public, and although  
I felt very challenged at  
times, I am so grateful  
for this opportunity’

*CLASP staff ‘trainee’*

1 Arts Council England  
Grants for the Arts  
Libraries Fund,  
Response to the  
Sieghart Review,  
March 2014

[2 Birmingham City  
Council Culture  
Commissioning Service](#)  
*Local Arts*

This Part 1 review summarises and evaluates the achievements of the Birmingham Community Libraries Art of Storytelling Project (CLASP). Part 2 describes its activities and evaluation in more depth and makes a more detailed analysis of the data collected.

CLASP was developed with support from the Wolfson Foundation, Birmingham City Council and the Arts Council England ‘s (ACE) Grants for the Arts Libraries fund . It grew from a concern that, despite the City’s flourishing cultural sector, its most deprived residents lacked access to and engagement with quality arts events. The project aimed that community libraries in disadvantaged areas should meet the Arts Council’s aspiration to embody a ‘safe, creative community space’ where ‘excellence is thriving’<sup>(1)</sup> , and be able to engage local people in the arts ‘ on their doorsteps ‘ <sup>(2)</sup>. A target group of children pre-school to age seven and their parents/carers was chosen both because of evidence about the impact of arts participation at a young age and for its legacy for Library use and communities in the future at a time when library visits by the very young may be falling. The choice of storytelling and performance was based on evidence about the impact of this genre on young children’s literacy and language development.

This was a complex, year-long project to help children experience stories in creative, visual and imaginative ways. It included in-depth training in creative storytelling for Library staff delivered by Sonia Sabri Company and professional performances from Birmingham’s Rep Theatre. The project also enabled smaller libraries outside the city centre to invest in digital technology to support children’s literacy. Staff participated with enthusiasm and commitment beyond the allocated time and reported satisfaction with their own skills development, summed up in a triumphant remark at the final review meeting, ‘We didn’t need the book!’.



# Aims and outcomes



## Aims

To increase access to high quality cultural activity in disadvantaged communities in Birmingham

To enhance the role of Community Libraries as creative community spaces where artistic excellence is thriving

## Outcomes

Six Community Libraries become creative hubs, able to support and encourage community participation in high quality participatory arts

Community Libraries are perceived as venues for high quality creative activities which will enhance their offer and attractiveness for existing and new users

Library Staff , local childcare staff, teachers and parents develop the confidence and skills to deliver creative storytelling and the insights to value it as contributing to young children's learning and wellbeing

## Objectives

Birmingham Rep Theatre delivers a number of high quality interactive performances for pre-school to seven year olds in accessible local library venues

A significant number of library staff are trained and mentored in the performance of creative storytelling, using Kathak dance by the Sonia Sabri Company and digital technology by Andy Spencer Media

These Library staff deliver an estimated six public performances using their new skills, reaching an anticipated audience of 720 young children and parents/carers

A similar number of parents/carers attend creative storytelling training workshops

A digital training manual for creative dance-based storytelling, available locally for Library Staff and users and online, supports further in-house and community learning and creativity

## Potential impact

A taste and demand for high quality arts and culture is fostered in disadvantaged communities

A culture of creative aspiration is embedded in participating Libraries resulting in higher quality arts and cultural activities and so enhancing their local role



# Project structure

CLASP ran from Autumn 2013 – Spring 2015. It was developed and managed by Birmingham Community Libraries Support Unit (CLSU) (1). The storytelling training was developed in close collaboration with Sonia Sabri Company (2). 26 Community Libraries accepted the invitation to take part in various ways. In addition, 23 staff volunteers from 21 of these Libraries were offered time off to attend and organise CLASP events.

## Phase 1 :

1 An intensive three months training programme which included seven full days in Libraries across the City and 22 face-to-face mentoring sessions in trainees 'home' libraries: this training focused on enabling each staff member to create and perform an engaging interactive story for 0-7 year olds using expressive dance and digital technologies (3)

2 Performances from Birmingham Rep (4) and Language Alive from the Birmingham Playhouse (5) in 14 Libraries – including Libraries not part of the training – offering three different interactive shows aimed at exploring language with 0-7 year olds and their parents/carers

## Phase 2 :

1 41 draft performances and public performances by trainees for audiences of children, parents, teachers and carers: each draft performance was followed by a mentoring 'debrief' from Sonia Sabri and final performances were filmed for the record and for learning

2 19 45 -minute workshops for parents/carers and teachers were held straight after most final performances offering ideas, techniques and reasons for more creative storytelling 'away from the book'

In addition, a digital training manual was produced by Andy Spencer and made available to all Community Libraries across the City online. 7

1 CLSU Team: Kevin Duffy, (Senior Service Manager Community Libraries), Beverley Fryer, Selina Syder

2 [Sonia Sabri](http://www.sscsco.org.uk/) Company is a leading contemporary South Asian dance company in the UK. [www.sscsco.org.uk/](http://www.sscsco.org.uk/)

3 Birmingham based digital media artist and filmmaker [Andy Spencer](https://aspencermedia.wordpress.com/) <https://aspencermedia.wordpress.com/>

4 [Birmingham Rep](http://www.birmingham-rep.co.uk/) Theatre: Open House 'theatre designed for babies' <http://www.birmingham-rep.co.uk/>

5 [The Play House](http://theplayhouse.org.uk) Birmingham theatre in education company <http://theplayhouse.org.uk>



## Statistical summary: activities



- The Birmingham Repertory Theatre presented *Open House*, theatre for the very young, in 14 libraries across the City
- Language Alive from the Birmingham Playhouse presented two different shows, *Hansel and Gretel* and *Rainforest Symphony*, in eight libraries across the City
- 375 children aged 0-7 and 215 of their parents, carers and teachers took part in these 22 free interactive performances
- 23 Librarians attended 7 full day training sessions led by professional dance, storytelling and digital media artists. This was followed by 22 one-to-one or small group mentoring sessions





- Each Librarian gave a draft and final public performance in a community library to audiences of young children and parents/carers or teachers – 41 altogether
- Over 870 children aged 0-7 took part in these free interactive storytelling performances led by the newly trained Library staff
- 447 parents, carers and teachers also took watched and part in these performances
- In addition, over 120 parents, carers and teachers took part in 19 free artist-led training workshops in libraries to learn new storytelling skills



## Statistical summary: participants

- Over 1,245 children aged 0-7 took part in CLASP as audience members in interactive performances designed for their age group
- Over 930 of these were pre-school (aged 0-5)
- Almost all were from Birmingham Wards designated as areas of Multiple Deprivation <sup>(1)</sup>
- Almost half of them were boys
- Over 770 adults (parents, carers, nursery staff and teachers) took part
- Half of the children (51%) and half of the adults were of other than 'white British' ethnicity

1. Indices of Multiple Deprivation are used by Government to measure disadvantage. They use a range of measures looking at aspects of people's lives:

Income Deprivation  
 Employment Deprivation  
 Health Deprivation and Disability  
 Education, Skills and Training  
 Deprivation  
 Barriers to Housing and Services  
 Crime Deprivation  
 Living Environment Deprivation.

All the Libraries in the this project were situated in areas of multiple deprivation. 40% of Birmingham's population live in areas designated in the worst 10% on this scale.



- 26 Community Libraries took part out of 37 (70%)
- 23 Library staff members took part in an intensive three months training programme, including seven full days; over 22 mentoring sessions were held
- Over 20 other library staff and volunteers, including local Work Experience students, supported the local events
- Nine Birmingham-based performance, dance, digital and storytelling artists were employed in the project and three arts companies

# Summary of findings

1. CLASP succeeded in its aim of bringing high quality participatory art to its target communities and exceeded its targets for the numbers of adults and children it reached. Feedback from these events was overwhelmingly highly positive.
2. The vast majority of the audiences for these events were from the targeted areas of disadvantage <sup>(1)</sup> and almost half of adult audience members (43%) reported no engagement in arts in the previous 12 months <sup>(2)</sup>.
3. The storytelling training /performances also exceeded its targets for the numbers of adults and children it reached and succeeded in raising the quality of cultural experience offered in the Libraries. The quality of performances was higher than expected by audiences and had immediate positive impact on wellbeing and imaginative engagement. Almost all parents, carers and teachers reported that children were highly engaged, excited and understood the performances and storytelling events.
4. Overwhelmingly, adults also found the events engaging and stimulating, with 97% saying that they were likely to tell more stories and use the Library more. This was supported by the fact that over a quarter of adults (122) attended a story telling workshop, with 61% able to identify new skills and 45% signing up for further contact <sup>(3)</sup>. Impact on future behaviour was also likely to be extended by significant numbers of pre-school and nursery staff in audiences and workshops.
5. The model of intensive group training followed by mentoring including of draft performances was effective in producing change and creating a legacy. CLASP succeeded in raising the creative storytelling skills and confidence of *all* the Library Staff training participants <sup>(4)</sup>. The quality of Staff storytelling performances demonstrably and significantly improved through the Project <sup>(5)</sup>. Nearly 80% of staff reported that they had 'already used their new skills' at work two months after project end and were committed to future activity.
6. The level of Library Staff enthusiasm and commitment to CLASP was very high. Participation tended to have a positive impact on staff morale. All participants had positive feedback from colleagues about their performances and half felt 'more appreciated' as a colleague, with 35% feeling more appreciated 'as an employee'. Nearly 60% reported positive impact on 'life outside work'.

<sup>1</sup> This is an estimate, based on incomplete postcode data, Library membership and interviews.

<sup>2</sup> This is considerably higher than the national and West Midlands averages for non-attendance (DMCS *Taking Part Survey* June 2015; ACE *Taking Part 2011/12 Findings for the West Midlands Region*)

<sup>3</sup> It was difficult to collate quantitative data on new Library membership or book loan to participation,

<sup>4</sup> Over 93% said they had 'learnt lots of new techniques and over 94% said they felt 'much more confident'.

<sup>5</sup> Based on analysis of nearly 500 feedback forms and 13 structured Observations using the ACE's Children and Young People's Quality Principles



## Summary of recommendations

1 The model of professional performance followed by staff training and mentored performances is successful both in fostering demand for high quality arts events and making them accessible in disadvantaged communities. This experience should be built on and extended within Birmingham and other Library Services.

2 In order to fulfil the potential for the project to support the role of Community Libraries to become 'creative hubs' it needs to be further enhanced by follow-up activity with parents/carers and staff.

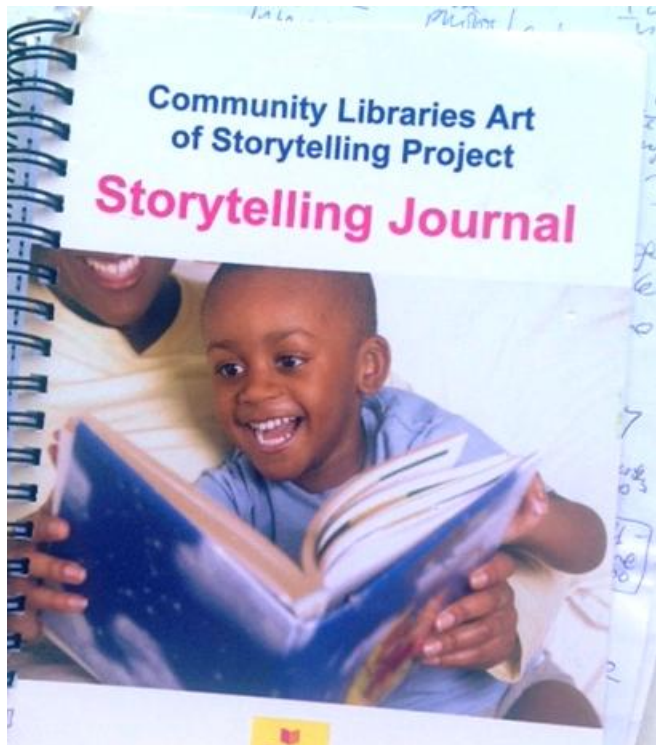
3 This work might include arts and cultural development drawn from the diverse communities served by the local venues; further staff training to prevent loss of skills over time; further digital media training; staff development in a range of roles related to commissioning as well as delivering quality arts events.

4 There was considerable benefit and excitement generated in and beyond participating Libraries by this new, risk-taking project and the positive impact of this on staff morale and skills should be celebrated and built on to ensure its demonstrated legacy endures. This should include improved communication with non-participating Library Staff and Managers, as well as participating staff, particularly in terms of demands on staff time.

5 A follow-up analysis of continuing CLASP-related activity and impact including collecting data about changes in perceptions of Libraries, their membership and use, should be carried out over the next 12 months. This would enhance the already strong argument for further funding.

# Methodology

Overall we collected nearly 500 feedback questionnaires from over 770 adults – and astonishing rate of return of 65%. This rate of return (particularly for a written feedback) was itself considered to be a measure both of high participant engagement and staff commitment to the project.

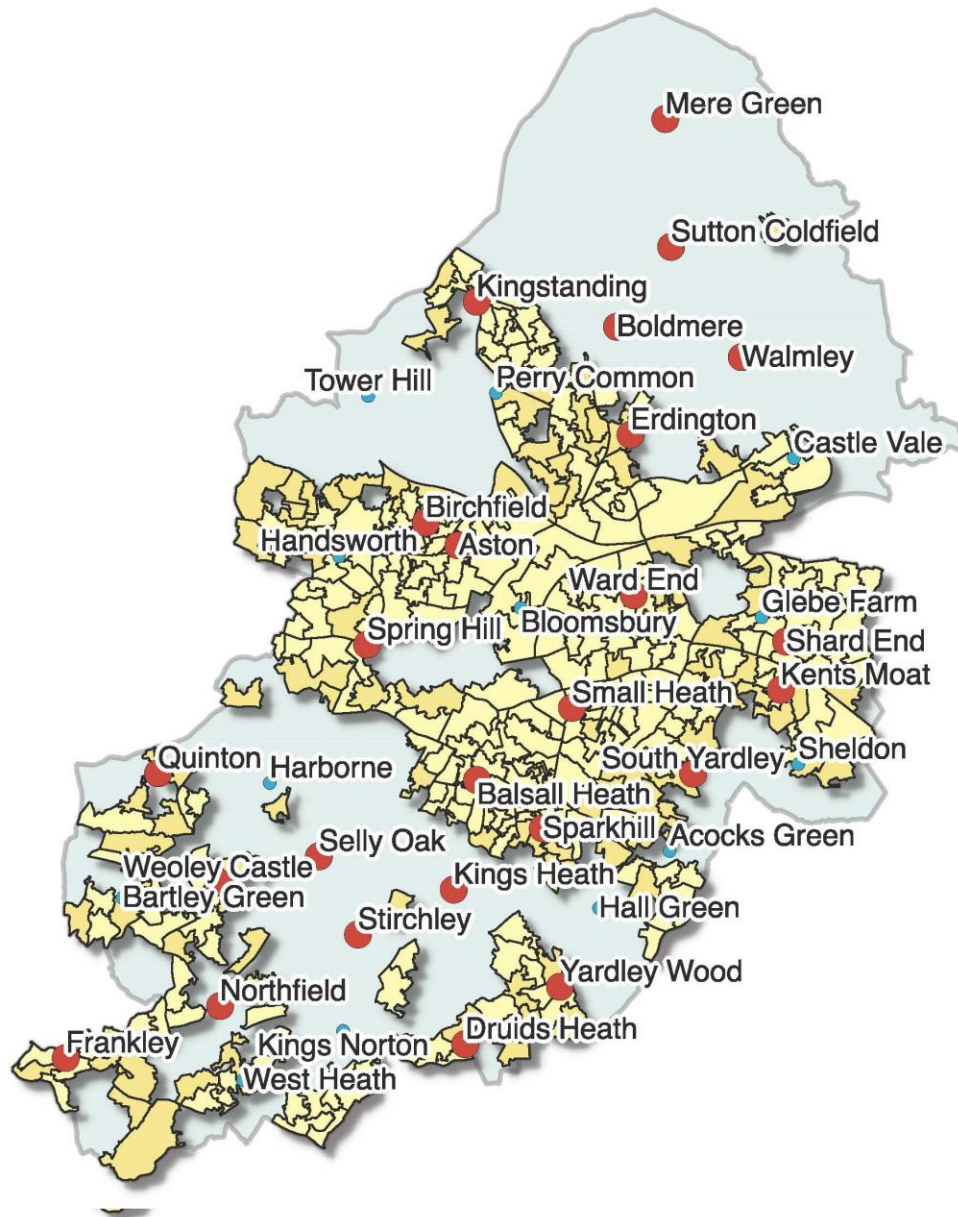


The CLASP evaluation methodology is described in more detail in Part 2 of this review. Independent evaluator Dr Sue Challis coordinated a participatory evaluation process which took place throughout the project, from planning stage to final review. In summary:

- CLSU staff developed the project's theory of change and agreed an evaluation structure
- Parents, carers and teachers completed feedback forms in consultation with children. Parents assessed how much of the story children could repeat, if they could they describe favourite moments and so on, as well as reporting on their own engagement and predicted behaviours.
- All the project sessions (theatre, training and storytelling) were viewed by more than one dedicated observer recording indicators of quality using the Arts Council's Children and Young People's Quality Principles as a framework.
- Participants at training sessions made written comments on their own learning and the training methods at every session and most kept a reflective journal over several months, some of which were shared with the evaluator
- 18/23 participating staff completed an anonymous online survey reviewing their experience and its impact two months after the project end
- 29 non-participating Library Staff and Managers completed an anonymous online survey reviewing the impact on the Service and Library users two months after the project end
- Interviews and surveys were recorded with artists and CLSU staff to review project processes, organisational issues and impact
- Meta data for Library use is available for collection

# Birmingham libraries July 2015

Participating libraries are shown as large red points, non-participating libraries are shown as smaller green points. The areas shown in shades of yellow were in the upper quintile of multiple deprivation in 2010. Those in the paler tint were in the upper decile of multiple deprivation.



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‘It was nice to work with  
colleagues from across libraries.  
It made me feel I was part of a  
big team, not just my own Library’

Library staff participant



CLASP was conceived by Birmingham Community Libraries and the format for the project was development in collaboration with local artists, Sonia Sabri Company, Andrew Spencer, Birmingham REP and Dr Sue Challis.

This report is Part 1 of a two stage review of CLASP written by independent evaluator Dr Sue Challis for CLSU. [ms.challis@btopenworld.com](mailto:ms.challis@btopenworld.com)

Part 2 is available from the Community Library Support Unit.

The CLASP Digital Storytelling Manual produced by Andy Spencer is available from the Community Library Support Unit

Images in this report are by Andy Spencer and Sue Challis.

CLSU can be contacted at [clsu@birmingham.gov.uk](mailto:clsu@birmingham.gov.uk); telephone 0121 675 2455/3.