

## Engaging Elders: a case study of the work at Sutton House, Hackney

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I am going to talk to you about the work of the National Trust with elders at Sutton House in Hackney, in the North East of London. What I have to say is drawn from the evaluation that I undertook of the first three years of this work.

Sutton House was built in 1535, and is one of the oldest dwellings in East London. It was bought by the National Trust in the 1930s, but not opened to the public until the early 1990s. Hackney is a vibrant urban community, with high levels of deprivation, a population that is ethnically and culturally diverse, and a dynamic cluster of heritage organisations, including the Geffrye Museum, the Buildings Exploratory and Hackney Museum. Entry to the House is free to National Trust members, non members pay.

All the quotations are from older people participating in projects at Sutton House.

While the national demographic of National Trust visitors shows a high proportion of over 55s, the staff at Sutton House were aware that they were not reaching their local audience of older people. They designed an initial programme of work that included outreach, free admission once a week, and a programme of talks and activities, as well as training in reminiscence work for staff and volunteers. The aim of the work was always a longer term, sustained relationship.

Staff learned an enormous amount from the outreach; going to centres where older people met, hearing about them and their lives, and sharing some key stories of Sutton House through a handling collection. The groups who they worked with in the first year remained key partners; they weren't big umbrella organisations, they included a tenant's group, an African Caribbean elder's organisation, a club for elders with disabilities.

There is now a thriving elder's drop-in at Sutton House, attracting up to 50 people each week. They come for creative arts and history, for friendship, and to continue learning.

In my evaluation of the first three years, I identified the following key components to the success of the work.

- **Invitation and welcome**

A clear, personal invitation made a huge difference to the older people who came to Sutton House. Overwhelmingly they had assumed that this historic building, and the

National Trust, was not for them. “I usually just pass”. Going out to visit groups allowed an opportunity to meet people, find out about their interests and needs, and invite them personally. In terms of recruitment this worked better than leaflets and advertising.

This needed to be matched by a really welcoming atmosphere when people did come. This meant practical things, like a place to hang coats, and tea and biscuits, but also people to welcome everyone, and enough people, (staff and volunteers) to take some time to chat. For many people there was a lack of confidence in entering the building, and it was important to make sure that they were seen and heard before they were asked to see and hear anything about Sutton House’s history. “It’s changed the whole perception of Sutton House. Yes, it’s historical, and yes, it’s our place.”

The importance of invitation and welcome has not diminished over the years. Although word of mouth has been an extremely effective method of recruitment, it has been important to continue to find ways to reach new people, and to make sure they know they would be welcome. Staff and volunteers who put time into making people welcome learn more about their audience and the local community, and the sense of the property as part of the community is made real.

- **Building relationships**

In the first year, one of the trial activities was a free afternoon of tours, talks and activities. While these were moderately successful, it was clear that they were not going to be the route to building an audience of older people. What the outreach, and, subsequently, the drop-in afternoons, offered was the opportunity to build relationships – with one another, with staff and volunteers, and with the House. This is quite different to what might happen with the general visitor, and demands a different approach from those working on the project. Sutton House employed artists to run creative activities linked to the history of the house. As well as being skilled in their art forms, and able to encourage other people’s creativity, they needed to be people who liked engaging with the participants, allowing time for conversation not related directly to the session. It became clear that people learned more once they felt welcome and comfortable, and they wanted to have fun while they were there. “You’re not just chatting, you’re learning. When I went into the House I felt like a went into a different world.”

Entering into a relationship with the group meant being able to be responsive. The more confident the group became, the more they began to make suggestions. Getting to know people provided clues about what sort of activities and themes to suggest. It is not possible to predict what sort of memories and narratives will be provoked by particular objects or historical accounts. I joined a group of older people discussing rationing during the Second World War, inspired by the Tudor kitchen.

Another important question that can arise is duty of care. Are you able and willing to help someone with transport if they become infirm or have a temporary difficulty? Is it appropriate to visit a participant in hospital? Knowing about other opportunities, and support networks locally can be really important, in order to be able to signpost people to services that you do not offer.

In the Sutton House elders group it is common to see birthday celebrations, commiserations on some bad news, or celebration on someone's recovery. This is not just the responsibility of those running sessions. The participants maintain the values of building relationship.

- **Generalities and assumptions**

This work began by identifying a group who Sutton House was not reaching. In naming a group, there is a danger that a lot of assumptions about that group will follow. It may be that some general background information might be useful, but it is crucial to remember that someone's age does not tell you their interests, abilities or energy level. In Year One of the work, there was the expectation that reminiscence would form the backbone of activities offered. However, this was too confining. The older people wanted to learn, to create, to discuss, and not only to reminisce. It was crucial not to have low expectations, and now that the group have made a film, performed at Hackney Empire, had an exhibition in the Sutton House Gallery and learned drumming, there is no going back. It is important that the facilitators of work with elders don't contribute to prevailing ageism, by limiting what they offer, both in content and form.

Research has shown that older people don't find it harder to learn new things, they just learn differently.

"I was no good at school; my head was too full of thoughts. So now, this is where I do my learning"

"At first it was to fill my retirement, but it has become more. We have so much to offer, each one"

- **Dialogue and reciprocity**

The initial focus of this work was the desire to reach a particular section of the local community, and to discover what Sutton House could offer them. The first three years were characterised by a spirit of exploration, and learning, learning about the audience. But of course, there was also a lot of learning going on about the House. This would come about by witnessing people's responses to particular narratives, their interest and curiosity about the Tudors, the Huguenots, the House as a school or as a squat. And new perceptions were opened up because people come with knowledge and experience and skills. The learning experience is not one way.

As well as the drop-in sessions for older people, Sutton House established a particular link with Hackney Caribbean Elders Organisation. The creative work began with concentrating on their stories. I can remember sitting with them in the Victorian Parlour, while they described their first homes in the UK. Later on, I was present at an inter-generational session where they taught children of Caribbean heritage the songs of their own childhood. Only slowly did the strands of their own stories and those of Sutton House connect; through the herbs used for cooking in the Tudor Kitchen, through the stories of migration of the Huguenots, through the detail of a painting showing a young black woman. Two particular things emerge from this careful building of relationship. Firstly, Sutton House offered a very special environment in which the group's stories could be told, and the artist working with them spoke about the group valuing their own stories more, because they were told in a special place, where people's stories are treasured. Secondly, Sutton House was learning about a strand of contemporary, local history, which would become part of its own story, through its Black History Trail, and they were reaching a community who simply never normally visited. The benefits were mutual

- **Arts work? Why?**

This work at Sutton House has been led by a team of creative artists, working with property staff, and volunteers. Why this approach? Using the arts encourages a sense of playfulness, and many people learn more when they are having fun. Creativity is everyone's right, and many adults are left out of opportunities to experiment, create and celebrate. Arts-based work can communicate a sense of place, can evoke feelings. One of the artists on the project used music and singing as a powerful way in. I was present at a session when the group were looking at the history of Sutton House in the 1980s. The artist leading the session came into the room, and told people that she had just been on the phone to a man who had been a squatter in the House at that time. The group were fascinated. This was a piece of history that had been going on while they were living near by, not knowing. Lizzie started to play songs from that time, and soon the group were singing – music that evoked the concerns and passions of that period, and provoked many memories among the group. The here and now and the past were vividly connected. The group then went on to remember, with much laughter, the fashions of the '80s, and to use art work to recreate some of it. The man who had spoken to Lizzie about his experience as a squatter told her that they had opened up the house for gigs on Saturday nights, and it had become, for a time, a centre for entertainment in the community. Participants were not slow to see the link with their own presence in Sutton House.

Working together through art, drama, music, or dance encourages relationship and dialogue between people. Creating work that others can see, through an exhibition or a performance brings validation and grows confidence. Using the imagination to approach historical narrative can make vital links between the present and the past.

In conclusion, the work with Elders at Sutton House has brought

**Engagement, participation, learning, celebration, and connection**

to great mutual benefit.