

## An Analysis of Deveron Projects, Huntly.

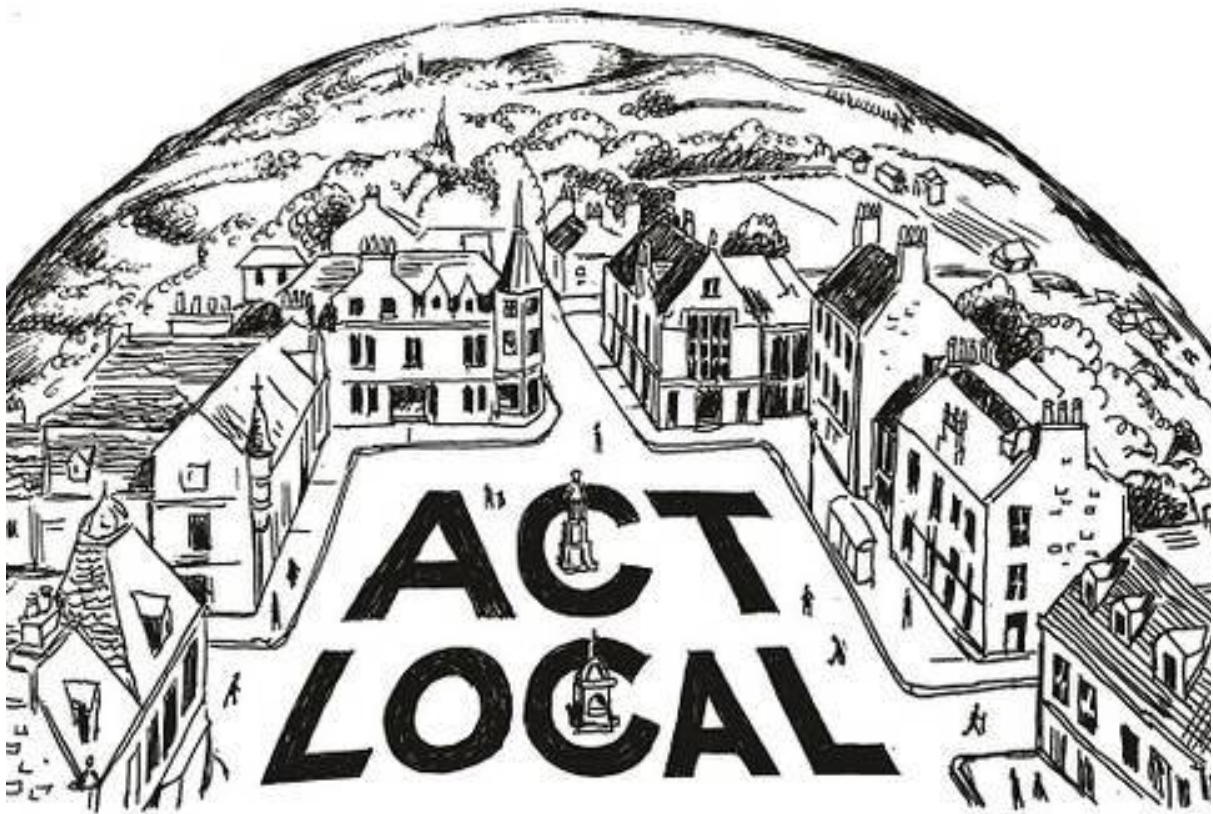


Illustration courtesy of Deveron Projects.

Deveron Projects is an arts organisation, and artist collective, based in Huntly, Aberdeenshire. Huntly is a small town, with a population of around 4,800 people based on a 2011 census by Aberdeenshire Council<sup>1</sup>. However, whilst Huntly as a town is by no means unique in the North East of Scotland, the makeup of the town does provide certain challenges for an arts organisation to thrive - 30.1% of the town is unemployed, and 53.1% of those who are employed leave Huntly by car each day to go to work. 20% of the households in Huntly are that of people who live alone, over the age of 65<sup>2</sup>. Perhaps the

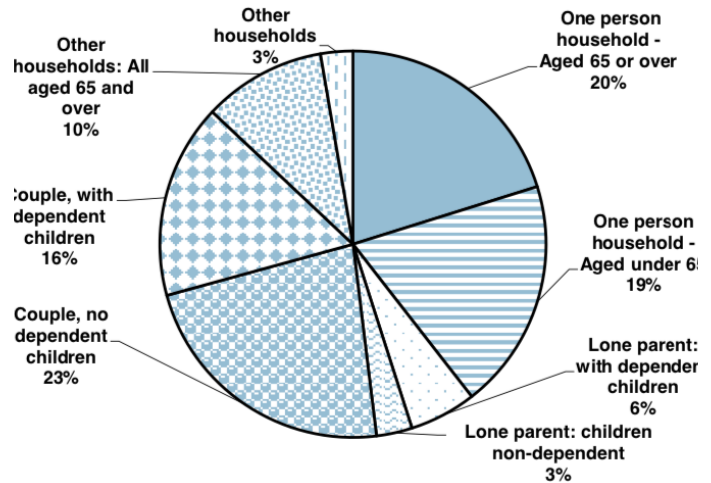
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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/media/11867/huntlycensusprofile.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/media/11867/huntlycensusprofile.pdf>

# The town is the venue

- Deveron Projects Motto.



most pressing statistic is that in Huntly, 34% of the population have no qualifications<sup>3</sup>. Yet, in spite of this set of challenges, Deveron Projects has successfully operated in Huntly since 1995.

To do this, Deveron Projects work with the motto “*The town is the venue*”, encouraging people (especially artists) to stay and work in Huntly, and creating opportunities for them to do so<sup>4</sup>. This, Deveron Projects believes, allows for a unique understanding of the town's cultural ecology and unique challenges, local beliefs and values. Instead of taking art practice from Huntly and transporting it to nearby cities such as Aberdeen, encouraging the practice to stay site-specific to Huntly therefore encourages local economy and preserves these local cultural values. Deveron Arts places a unique emphasis on the cultural and social importance of the Doric language as a part of local heritage and identity, and by maintaining site-specific practice, allows Doric language and humour to survive for future generations.

The North East of Scotland has many location-specific problems, the most pressing of which is the unusually high suicide rate in that area. The Scottish Suicide Information Database statistics from 2011-2017<sup>5</sup> showed that the North East of Scotland had a slightly higher rate of death by suicide than the rest of the country, with social isolation and reduced job opportunities in rural areas,

**LIVE WHERE  
YOU WORK  
WORK WHERE  
YOU LIVE**

In keeping with the *town is the venue*, we – artists and art workers – live/work in the town. Being part of local life helps create a better understanding of the culture, its strengths, its problems and how they can be solved. This way the artist has a role like any other worker in the town.



Deveron Projects brochure, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/media/11867/huntlycensusprofile.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Deveron Projects brochure, 2019, [https://www.deveron-projects.com/site\\_media/uploads/spreads-2.pdf](https://www.deveron-projects.com/site_media/uploads/spreads-2.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> National Health Service, Information Service Division Report, <https://www.isdscotland.org/Health-Topics/Public-Health/Publications/2018-12-04/2018-12-04-ScotSID-Report.pdf>

coupled with the lack of mental health support out with of cities being cited as amongst the leading predictors of suicide. Whilst Deveron Projects has never taken an explicit anti-suicide stance, their mindfulness projects (such as The Walking Institute which organises “Artist Walks” for members of the community, including “Slow Marathons” during which communities walk to culturally important sites such as the Cabrach on guided walks as an action of mindfulness), and their emphasis on community through sharing meals every Friday alongside art-relevant talks, and encouraging local economy at the heart of which “people matter”, therefore translates into opportunities for people to develop and forge meaningful relationships within their own town and enjoy the knock on benefits those relationships have on mental health. Deveron Projects adopts their “50/50” guideline for socially engaged work<sup>6</sup>, which seeks to balance artistic endeavour with everyday life,

therefore allowing individuals and their wider community to benefit from the projects, mentally, physically, and economically. This also prevents Deveron Projects being “just an arts project in the town”, but instead gives it cultural and social value within the community, meaning that the people of Huntly are invested in the continued success of the project and are keen to engage with it.

Huntly is in a fairly rural area, and whilst Deveron Projects is keen to keep work, life and art based firmly in Huntly, they also look out with of Aberdeenshire for the inspirations and projects. It may be easy to think of rural, North East, Aberdeenshire towns

as being cut off from the outside world and insular, and to criticise projects such as Deveron for actually fuelling this insular way of life, which can so often breed a fear or distrust of the outside world that eventually shows itself as racism, or xenophobia. Whilst exact statistics are often hard to come by, the North East of Scotland, and therefore Aberdeenshire, does have a prevalent and often unspoken problem with racism and xenophobia, so much so that Chief Superintendent of Grampian Police Campbell Thomson described hate crimes in the North East as being so frequent they were “*the new drink driving*”<sup>7</sup>. To combat this, Deveron Projects has brought artists from war-torn areas, artists with refugee experience and artists who focus on mindfulness and community practice to Huntly, where they lead walks, run workshops for the local community and encourage a coming together of people over local cultural sites, local landscape and community shared

<sup>6</sup> Deveron Projects brochure, 2019, [https://www.deveron-projects.com/site\\_media/uploads/spreads-2.pdf](https://www.deveron-projects.com/site_media/uploads/spreads-2.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Press and Journal, October 11 2018, <https://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/fp/news/aberdeen/1582785/racism-is-the-new-drink-driving-top-cop-says/>



The 50/50 principle is our guideline for a socially engaged work practice, balancing artistic endeavor with everyday life. For example:

ARTIST / COMMUNITY  
IDEALS / REALITY  
TENSION / SOLUTION  
LOCAL / GLOBAL  
HOME / AWAY

But also:

HOSPITALITY / CRITICALITY  
CONTEMPORARY / TRADITIONAL  
YOUNG / OLD  
IN / OUT  
...

places. For example, in 2020 Iranian artist and photographer Iman Tajik is working with Deveron Projects - Tajik currently resides in Glasgow, and in collaboration with Deveron Projects will be leading two walks, one from Glasgow to Dungavel Removal Centre, and one from the depopulated Cabrach to Huntly<sup>8</sup>. The project, called Bordered Miles, seeks to

**“...and it strikes her, as she walks, that borders, like hatred, are exaggerated precisely because otherwise they would cease to exist altogether. ”**

- Colum McCann.

explore within the context of social engaged artistic practice the importance of freedom of movement of humans, of how we should be free to travel and how borders are politically motivated by capitalism and xenophobia. Whilst importing an artist from Glasgow to Huntly in a project that seeks to keep everything as local as possible to Huntly seems counterproductive to the goals of Deveron Projects, it actually provides an invaluable and tangible link to the outside world for the residents of Huntly. The “imported” artist will live and work in Huntly for a period of time, therefore interacting with the local community and forging relationships with them, and taking an opportunity to talk about political and artistic challenges through the lens of local landscape with which residents are already familiar. Take for example the importance of the Cabrach - the Cabrach is a now depopulated, moor-like landscape with a rich history of Doric language, of illegal distilling, of the forced removal of people from the land during Clearances. The Cabrach is looked after today by the Cabrach Trust, which seeks to preserve the heritage and cultural importance of the Cabrach - which just so happens to be near Huntly, and be highly valued by local residents. By taking large, global issues and talking about them through the lens of a local part of the landscapes that people know well and understand, not only do you draw attention and therefore visitors and investment in the local economy through these projects, but you also enable communities to learn, adapt and grow opinions and even activism on highly political issues, at grass roots local level. Similar projects coming out of Deveron in Huntly and growing across the country, and even the continent, include Deveron’s founder/director Claudia Zeiske’s project *Home to Home* from 2017<sup>9</sup>, which allowed reflection on what it meant to be European in an uncertain geo-political climate. Deveron is successfully bringing geo-politics to a small town in the North East of Scotland, in a way that allows residents of all ages to engage with and understand.

Of course, the main problem with any arts organisation, but most pressingly with projects such as Deveron Projects which is “making” important things, but not anything one can “sell” for profit, is where is the funding coming from, and how does this organisation continue to sustain itself? Deveron’s goal to allow as many people as possible to enjoy and engage with their projects means that their Friday lunches and talks operate on a “pay what

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<sup>8</sup> TAJIK, I, 2020, <https://www.deveron-projects.com/bordered-miles/>

<sup>9</sup> ZEISKE, C, 2017, <https://www.deveron-projects.com/home-to-home/>

you can” basis, and many of their guided walks and socially engaged projects are free, the Project obviously isn’t making profit from ticket revenue or sales from a cafe or restaurant. Deveron Projects does run a store from which one can purchase t-shirts, clothing, prints, books and other zines and souvenirs made by artists that are relevant or about life in Huntly, or previous Deveron projects. However, again this small store can not possibly be making enough money to sustain the Deveron Project. Whilst operating on a free/pay-what-you-can/low price range model allows for a lot more local engagement in a community in which over 20% of the population are retired and around 30% are unemployed, it does make the project more reliant than some similar projects on external funding. Deveron Projects is a recipient of Regular Funding (2018-2021) from Creative Scotland, which means they will receive an average amount of funding of £110,000 per year from 2018-2021<sup>10</sup> (they received a total of £330,000 of funding between 2015-2018 through the same Regular Funding Network via Creative Scotland<sup>11</sup>). Of course, accepting money from tax-payer funded public bodies such as Creative Scotland is never without controversy, and in 2018, upon the unveiling of the Regular Funding awards for 2018-2021 that Deveron Projects was a recipient of, Creative Scotland came under considerable criticism leading to an inquiry into their decision making and a senior board member resigning, over decisions to discontinue Regular Funding awards to several arts organisations that work with disabled people and children<sup>12</sup>. Whilst this crisis was sort of resolved upon inquiry into the decision making, it is also a serious point of concern for a project like Deveron - they are site-specific by nature, meaning that they do not have the option (without directly betraying their founding principles) to move from Huntly to somewhere with a more transient and rich population willing to spend money on the arts, such as London. They are entirely dependent on this type of substantial, long-term funding and when this funding can be subject to politically motivated cuts to the sector, their long-term viability is questionable. However, because of the unique nature of the Deveron Project, they are eligible for funding from some places that other arts organisations might not be, which is possibly why they have successfully sustained themselves since 1995 - in 2019, Deveron Projects received £270,000 of funding from the Scottish Land Fund, a Scottish Government initiative to support community ownership of land and land assets. On account of Deveron’s relationship with the local landscape, they were more than entitled to this funding. Deveron Projects has a massive focus on sustainable, renewable and climate friendly practice and understands the importance of eco-sustainable action when interacting with fragile ecosystems such as the Cabrach, and has several projects such as *Town Is The Garden* which encourages and teaches people how to grow their own food. This interest and practice therefore entitles Deveron to receive funding from the Climate Challenge Fund. The Climate Challenge Fund is managed by Keep Scotland Beautiful, however it is a Scottish Government initiative, therefore meaning that the money awarded through the Fund comes

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<sup>10</sup> Creative Scotland Regular Funding Network funding breakdown, <https://www.creativescotland.com/funding/latest-information/funded-organisations/regular-funding-2018-21>

<sup>11</sup> Creative Scotland Regular Funding Network funding breakdown, <https://www.creativescotland.com/funding/latest-information/funded-organisations/regular-funding-2018-21>

<sup>12</sup> FERGUSON, B, 15th March 2019, The Scotsman, <https://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/arts-funding-shake-looming-after-creative-scotland-crisis-73922>

from the taxpayer. Deveron has received from the 1st of April 2018 to the 31st of March 2020, Deveron received a grant of £135,400 from the CCF<sup>13</sup>. In 2013, Deveron Projects was key in helping Huntly win £100,000 Creative Place Award<sup>14</sup> - the Creative Place Award is an award of money to set up a fund to support creativity in towns or villages of less than 10,000 people. With this money, the Huntly Cultural Fund was developed through collaboration of Deveron Projects with the Huntly District Development Trust<sup>15</sup>. The Huntly Cultural Fund went on to accept creative project applications from several creatives in Huntly, and then met on a community committee basis to pick winners<sup>16</sup>. Whilst their insistence even upon helping the town to win substantial amounts of funding to keep all decision making at a local, community level is admirable, an obvious flaw in their long-term viability is their reliance on public funding. Public funding is obviously effected by ebbs and flows in politics, and this puts organisations such as Deveron at risk of being the victim of cuts. Whilst Deveron's ideals - community focused, sustainable, and eco-friendly - currently cater well to current political ideals, looking out with of Scotland towards countries such as Brazil and the United States, it is deeply apparent that a change in government ideology could mean that they are left with little to no funding, and when they have accepted around £1,000,000 of public money in the past six years, that could also mean the end of their project.

Whilst the business of art is in near constant flux, as our digital world changes how we consume art, buy art and engage with art, projects such as Deveron Projects do represent the future of the business. At the same moment the Venice Biennale announced that in the future, all art and artists must make their way to Venice via train, and art institutions and universities scramble to change decades long habits of importing globally travelling shows, as increasingly we all become aware of the ramifications of our carbon footprints and of our rapidly changing climate. In this regard, Deveron Projects is many years ahead of the curve - they deliberately keep their activities local to Huntly, they encourage walking activities, and they fund and help communities create their own gardens, grow their own food and keep jobs local to prevent commuting. Whilst Deveron is arguably not a "business" in the traditional sense of the word - in that whilst they have a small store, they do not necessarily sell art and they do not often create "art" that can be sold - this model of a business that creates very little and therefore creates very little waste, increases the businesses sustainability and fits in with the "new" art world which is striving to create low waste, low carbon artistic practice. Increasingly, the art world and the public in general are waking up to the negative consequences of our constant "on" digital lifestyles, which we now all understand fuels anxiety and depression on almost pandemic

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<sup>13</sup> Funding Awards, Climate Challenge Fund, <https://www.keepsotlandbeautiful.org/sustainability-climate-change/climate-challenge-fund/ccf-in-action/funded-projects-map/>

<sup>14</sup> Creative Place Award Winners 2013, <http://www.allmediascotland.com/media-releases/45134/2013-creative-place-award-winners-announced/>

<sup>15</sup> Huntly Cultural Fund, Huntly District Development Trust, <http://huntlydevelopmenttrust.org/huntly-cultural-fund-2/>

<sup>16</sup> Deveron Project Creative Place Award Statement, <https://www.deveron-projects.com/about/creative-place-award-and-huntly-cultural-fund/>

scales<sup>17</sup>, Deveron's focus on mindfulness, walking in nature, sharing social time within your community and "slow" activities such as allotment keeping are all proven to reduce anxiety and depression, and are all projects that Deveron are currently working on using the public money they receive within their own community. Combining the sustainability and mental health benefits of this model with the contemporary shifts in the art world (Creative Scotland are considerably more likely to fund community engaged projects because of the proven benefits these projects have on their residents, and many arts organisations have begun to explore the benefits of art practice on mental wellbeing as well as previously mentioned shifts towards sustainability), Deveron Projects is a very good model to work from for future artistic endeavours and projects. Whilst Deveron Projects provides a good framework from which to model other artistic endeavours, it is worth noting the key weakness in doing so - for example, the North East of Scotland, and in particular Aberdeenshire in which Huntly is located, provides a very unique landscape to work with that may not be so easily available to a similar project in somewhere such as inner-city Glasgow. Aberdeenshire also has a unique local and cultural heritage, which again whilst similar could theoretically be available in another location, it would never be quite the same set of circumstances that Deveron Projects is working within. As previously mentioned, Deveron is highly reliant on public funding, which whilst in the current context and set against current political ideology is working in their favour, also means that should the funding ever be cut, or the ideology behind the powers controlling the money change, Deveron would likely be unable to operate - to create a new business modelled off of Deveron's current model that would be more sustainable, it would be wise to investigate internal methods of generating income without sacrificing the integral principles of affordable engagement within the arts. In spite of these criticisms, Deveron Projects has successfully operated in Huntly since 1995, and certainly does not conduct "business as usual" in comparison to other, similar artistic organisations not only nearby them in the North East of Scotland, but in the wider context of the United Kingdom as a whole.

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<sup>17</sup> RANASINGE, E, *A Mental Health Pandemic*, <https://www.omidyar.com/blog/mental-health-pandemic-world-getting-more-addicted-anxious-and-lonely>