# FloodEvaluation

## Appendix 26: Residents Focus Group Report

The following report summarises feedback from residents of Victoria Dock during and immediately after the live performances of *Flood*.

An open-call for participants was published in two editions of the Victoria Dock e-newsletter, before and shortly after the final, live performances. Respondents were screened to ensure a variety of demographic groups were represented within each session.

Feedback was gathered via five focus groups facilitated by a Research Fellow from the University of Hull, between September and November 2017.

The focus groups explored the following topics with participants:

* Victoria Dock and Hull as a place to live
* Relationship between Slung Low and Victoria Dock residents
* The experience of having a theatre company in residence
* Experiences of Flood as audience members

16 residents attended across the three in-delivery focus groups, and 18 attended across the two post-event focus groups. Analysis of their feedback is summarised in the following report.

## Feelings about Victoria Dock

All the residents said they enjoyed living on Victoria Dock, and they particularly liked its proximity to Hull city centre. Most people felt there was a strong sense of community except a few people in one group who felt that the sense of community was inhibited by the number of flats in the area: *“people live here and close the door”.*

A number of people mentioned that there was a good nursery and primary school which had attracted many young families, and the lack of secondary school meant there were very few teenagers hanging about. Indeed, most people said they felt safe and that crime was low.

There was a feeling that more people were becoming aware of Victoria Dock because of things like the Hull marathon and 10k – which both pass through the area – and the Siemens factory, which is accessible to pedestrians along the river front.

The main complaints were:

* Traffic – people using Victoria Dock to cut through the traffic on the A63;
* Parking, although residents have their own, designated parking spaces;
* Noise from the Siemens factory being built.
* Litter;
* Lack of maintenance from Hull City Council – some felt it had been better maintained before Hull’s City of Culture year;
* Lack of a convenience store – the local shop recently closed down;

## Slung Low’s Arrival & initial reactions

Some people said they’d received a leaflet about Flood, and others had seen information on social media. Some had heard about the project through their involvement with the community association, who had been approached by Slung Low before they arrived.

For some people the first sign of their arrival was their caravans and, even then, some thought they were from the travelling community.

“We had just kicked the gypsies off the park a couple of weeks before. Then it was like, oh god they've come back.”

Residents said they felt intrigued and excited when they realised that Slung Low were there to deliver an outdoor theatre production, particularly as *“we don't really have much happening.”* It also helped that most participants already had an interest in theatre. Some were pleased that the dock was going to be used for something.

“It was nice to see the water actually used for something other than a breeding ground for flies.”

The vision for Flood was presented to the local community at a meeting, which heightened enthusiasm for the project, although some members of the community admitted they were sceptical about whether their plans were achievable.

“It's like, okay, we'll believe it when we see it.”

Some residents said they’d had some initial concerns about Slung Low adding to the parking and litter problems on Victoria Dock, but overall there was a sense of anticipation and excitement.

## Relationship with the local community

Slung Low were keen to engage and include the local community wherever possible; they offered workshops and tours to schools and community groups, and made sure residents had access to tickets and invited them to dress rehearsals. Residents with balconies overlooking the floating stage were given headphones so they could enjoy the shows. These gestures were seen as crucial in pacifying local people who were perhaps more cynical about the project.

“I think the free tickets are the clincher, 'cause I think if I haven't got free tickets and I'm not able to buy tickets, then you've been incredibly pissed off then.”

“They really do seem to have tried to be inclusive and as considerate as they can be. I mean, like fighting for stage three. I know the BBC wanted it virtually closed set but no they fought for residents to be able to go watch the rehearsals.”

It was mentioned that being based on Victoria Dock really helped Slung Low to integrate with the community. They were appreciative of the opportunity to deliver the project in this setting, and made a conscious effort to give back to the local community wherever possible.

“They were ordering all this [food] locally. They're putting money straight back into the local community. They took us all for a meal on the pub at the dock. It's money going straight back into, as local as they possibly can.”

Communications were good; a mailing list was created for residents to inform them of when Slung Low would be on-site, information was regularly included in the Victoria Dock newsletter. A number of people also mentioned that the production team were friendly, approachable, and happy to answer questions from members of the public.

“Every time they're coming back, I've got an email. Every time they're doing something new, I've had an email.”

“There's a warmth, you know with you just walking past, going to and fro. You know they say hello and stuff, so there is a warmth to them.”

Despite their residency on-site and their efforts to keep local residents in the loop, there were apparently some residents who claimed to know very little about what was going on.

“There's still people on the dock, a friend of mine who said I didn't know anything about it until quite late on. I'm like open your eyes. I think it was just, some people live a very shuttered and sheltered life. They drive to the dock and they don't look around.”

Any concerns that Slung Low might leave a mess in the area turned out to be unfounded; they were sensitive to the concerns of local residents around parking and litter, and were quick to repair any damage they caused.

“We had an awful lot of reservations about all these thousands of people who are going to be coming from all over England, we went "whoa, hang on a minute. Where are they all going to park? Where are they all going to go to the loo? There's going to be litter all over the place." And they were brilliant at addressing every single issue. They've come to every resident's meeting since they've been here.”

“They've left it as good as they found it. You wouldn't know they'd been there. They were, it's been absolutely so ... But they've been really good neighbours.”

Residents were appreciative that Slung Low had instructed visitors to park at The Deep, given their concerns about the effect the project might have on parking on Victoria Dock. Indeed, they felt that audiences had been well-managed by the Slung Low team with support from the Hull2017 volunteers.

In some ways they also helped the environment; for example, they used aerators in the dock to destroy the algae and improve the water quality.

As a slight criticism, the testing of explosions and pyrotechnics disturbed shift workers who were trying to get some sleep during the day. Other than that, residents reported very little noise, even during the live performances, which was helped by the use of headphones.

“I was really surprised by how much you hear nothing and everyone just speaks really quietly in the water. It's all head-phoned.”

Another slight disappointment was that residents weren’t asked to be involved in the production as community cast members.

“We haven't had the opportunity to part of the actual play. That would've been quite cool. If I could've gone on stage, I'd quite like that. That would've been quite cool.”

## Impact and legacy

Most residents said they’d felt sad when Slung Low left. Although it was quieter and more peaceful, many people said they missed the ‘buzz’ that had been generated by the project.

“There's an energy slightly gone from the area.”

In terms of impacts, there was an overwhelming sense of pride that Slung Low had chosen Victoria Dock for the project, and residents said it had them feel prouder and more protective of their local area.

“This could only happen at Victoria Dock. You know, it's so unique and specific and that increases the pride because this wouldn't have worked at one of the other estates.”

There was a feeling that the project has raised awareness of the Victoria Dock area across the city and further afield. This was helped by increased social media activity amongst residents and the Slung Low team, who also helped to raised the profile of Hull more generally by tweeting about other events and activities in the city throughout 2017.

“If anyone was criticizing it, I felt quite defensive about it, which surprised me. 'Cause even though I do live in the area, I've not really got anything to ... well, apart from being on the shift, but I was just proud of it really, I guess.”

Their presence also helped to bring the community together and made them feel part of the Hull2017 story.

“What Slung Low did was bring everybody together. We were a community, but that bit was over there, that bit was over there ... But so, it brought everybody together in the one place.”

“It makes you feel a part of it. There's a lot think that just seem to go on over there in the town centre, or on some of the remote estates. To have something here, in our own community, it's been a big difference.”

For many people the project has opened up the possibility of using the dock for other purposes. The experience of Flood had provided a number of valuable lessons in terms of delivering a piece of theatre in a residential area.

“I think what Flood did was show the possibilities that it can be used for…something more than just collecting groundwater.”

The project brought people into the local area and offered a positive image of Hull to people from outside the area.

“People who don't live in Hull, it's brought them to a residential area. Dare I say it, a nice residential area whereas some of them might have only heard of some of the more negative residential areas of Hull. Like the more famous ones, like Bransholme and ones that make the news or Jeremy Kyle.”

Being based in a residential area introduced the project to residents who perhaps wouldn’t ordinarily attend the theatre.

“They brought theatre to people who don't necessarily go to the theatre.”

“You don't have to walk through those doors and therefore it made it more accessible, I'd think. You didn't have to go into the city centre if you didn't want to.”

Residents were pleased to learn that a book had been published which contained scripts and acknowledgements to the local community. Many participants said they would be keen to commemorate the project in some way.

“I almost feel that we should have a reflective exhibition of people's memories, and their photographs and stuff, to kind of commemorate Flood being there.”

One person said it would have been nice to have built a permanent stage on the dock, so that it could be used by the community and other theatre companies.

## Feedback as audience members

Most residents said they’d enjoyed *Flood* as audience members. There was a sense that the production and themes had been so wide-ranging that it was bound to appeal to everyone on some level.

“I feel that as a piece of theatre though, when you're looking at the show on a whole or a section, certain parts, it discovered lots of different genres of theatre showing to people to think that theatre is all just Shakespeare. It's not but to people that like Shakespeare it had more ... It had monologues and it duologues and it had different aspects of theatre to show. I think people then think actually I do like theatre. To people that did like theatre, they went yeah, yeah I love theatre it's great…It also took in aspects with all the explosions and stuff with making it more modern. It's like it's created more of a new genre of theatre and it's brought theatre into a different light for people that maybe necessarily don't like theatre as much and realized that they do like certain aspects of theatre.”

Residents generally felt the production values were high, and some expressed surprise at what they were able to achieve on the water. The fact that it was multi-platform made it interesting and accessible to audiences because it allowed people to choose how they wanted to engage with the production.

“I think one of the things I really liked about it, it was for all ages. Also, it appealed to those people who liked going on the internet to see things, those people who were television watchers, and also the live theatre. You got all of them if that's what you wanted. You could pick and choose.

“It wouldn't have been a spectacle, would it, if it had been in the Hull Truck Theatre. It would've just been ... Uh, another play.”

It also challenged some people’s understanding of theatre, and some said they’d felt privileged to have seen such an innovative production.

“We go to theatres all over the country, and even all over the world; Vegas and places like that. This was very, very different. It was completely different to anything we've seen.”

‘It was unique, definitely unique. I think we're really lucky that we got it here because it could have been in Salford Quays or London.’

Some people felt it was unclear that *Flood* was a four-part production, which perhaps explains why Part Four took much longer to sell out.

“People initially may well have thought that they were going to see exactly the same as they'd already seen in part two. We had to work quite hard with people saying, no actually it's the next one. It's a four-parter. Don't forget to see the one on TV. And then there's the finale. I mean it wasn't called the finale but when you do it by saying that to encourage people to go. I'm not sure but I think that might have been the reason.”

The suitability 12 rating was considered to be about right for the level of violence and the physical demands on audiences.

“I think that younger children or younger like, ten, eleven year olds some of them may have got it but I think some of them may have just switched off because it's a long time to stand, it's a long to keep your concentration on something with a shorter attention span of a younger person.”

One suggestion was to make greater use of social media channels like Instagram and Snapchat to appeal to younger audiences.

“They could've had a Snapchat filter but they also could've had a story where people that go to see the Flood, they take a video on it, they put a snap of it, then they put it onto the Flood's story. Because we have that stuff for Freedom Festival and City of Culture and stuff like that. So when you go and see an event you can snap it or you can take a selfie add it to your story, add it to their story.”

Looking at each of the episodes in turn, residents said they’d enjoyed **Part 1: From The Sea**, which was intriguing and engaging.

“It was a very good taster and a very good hook to get you hooked it. It was about the right length as a hook. Very clever.”

However, one person commented that it was difficult for audiences to connect Parts One and Two due, in part, to the length of time between them.

“It took a bit of work to sort of take your mind back to one when you're seeing two. So the link there was a bit tenuous at first. Only when you think back you can see it but at the time it was difficult to relate the two.”

The use of headphones for **Parts Two** and **Four** made it a more immersive, engaging experience for the audience.

“Some people would've switched off to, I think on a normal stage.”

**Part 3: To The Sea** received mixed feedback. Some people really enjoyed it and knew other people who had bought tickets to the omnibus on the back of seeing it on TV.

Others were more critical; some felt it worked better as a live performance than a TV episode. For example, viewers could see the dock in the background, which confused the narrative.

“Watching it on TV, they're kind of meant to be in the middle of water, you know, miles from anywhere and stuff, but you can see the docks. And I think, "Well, why don't you just swim over there to the dock?" So that kind of spoilt it a bit in the TV thing. Obviously when you're in the dock, you know it's a dock.”

**Part 4: New World** was generally well-received. Some felt the audience experience was better because the stage had been brought closer to the viewing area.

“The first few they were so distant, they were little ants that were performing. I was really pleased that last time I came back to see it.”

A number of residents commented that the ending was emotional. Some liked that it was left open-ended but others would have liked more conclusions.

“I cried at the ending. I think there's a potential for more. They've left it open. If they did want to come back, they could do something more on it. Equally it's final enough that it's okay. You're not left totally wanting more.”

### Narrative and themes

They felt that the ambition of the narrative had matched the ambition of the production, but some felt the introduction of multiple storylines and themes created confusion.

“He tackled lots of different things. I think some of them were lost if you only watched it once.”

“I thought it was appropriate for the audience to be pushed and challenged when the environment and the physical piece was challenging. It being small, happy, it wouldn't have quite fit it.”

It was mentioned that Flood had caused some debate between audience members about what the various themes and messages it contained.

“We found that in the office, just sort of, even making notes amongst such a small group, we all have completely different interpretations of what it means. And I suppose that's the whole point, isn't it?”

One of the criticisms of the narrative was that it became less realistic throughout the four episodes.

“In all honesty I've been disappointed and progressively more disappointed as it's gone on by its weirdness, and it's all unravelling”.

A couple of people also pointed out that the lesbian storyline had felt a bit tokenistic.

“I felt like they'd include it to be inclusive, which I don't know whether that's a bad thing or a good thing.”

It was agreed that the production was thought-provoking, although some pointed out that the cold conditions had made it difficult to consider issues in too much details at time.

“I think at the time I watched it I'm thinking, I need to get warm. A few days later, I thought about it, yeah.”

It had made them consider a wide range of issues, such as:

* Migration / refugees;

“There's a lot of people complaining all the time about refugees coming to England and that all people come from Eastern Europe, or whatever it is, in Holland and all that. It kind of turned the tables. It was English people were the refugees and how easy it can happen.”

“Yeah, you do think about the perilous journeys that refugees make to go and flee their conflicts and stuff.”

* Vulnerability of human life;
* Human behaviour in extreme situations
* Their own moral compass *“It really opened your eyes to people's behaviour, and make you think, "How would I react in that situation?"*
* The vulnerability of human life
* Climate change and rising sea levels: some said it had brought attention to local flooding issues.

“The new sea wall announcement came at roughly the same time as Slung Low, and so it sort of focused people's minds.”

‘We're all involved in this rising global sea levels, and no matter whether you be black, white, straight, gay, we're all going to be affected in the same way.’

## Summary

Residents, on the whole, appear to have thoroughly enjoyed having Slung Low based at Victoria Dock over the course of 2017. They were courteous, friendly, approachable and respectful of the local community. Despite concerns that their residency would create further parking and litter problems, residents reported that the team had made concerted efforts to protect the environment and minimise disruption.

Gestures such as invitations to dress rehearsals and free tickets appear to have pacified those who might have been sceptical about the project and its impact on the local area. Regular communications through the local resident’s association and newsletter was also crucial. They also made a real effort to get to know local people, which helped to bring the entire Victoria Dock community together.

Residents felt an overwhelming sense of pride that Slung Low had chosen Victoria Dock as the location for Flood. The production was considered to have raised the profile of the area and made them feel part of the Hull2017 story.

There is a real desire amongst the community to commemorate Slung Low’s residency at Victoria Dock and they were delighted to learn about the published script, which makes reference to their role in the production.

As audience members they found the production innovative and engaging with a broad appeal. Whilst they admired the ambition of the narrative, this was sometimes overly-complicated by the introduction of multiple plotlines and themes. For some it had challenged their understanding of theatre in the traditional sense.

Their experience also made them think about a wide range of issues including migration and climate change, and forced them to consider their own behaviour and morals.