

# Creativity, Culture and Connection

Responses from arts and  
culture organisations in  
the COVID-19 crisis

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## About Common Vision

Common Vision is a think tank working to change the narrative around our shared future. We use the power of positive ideas to detoxify angry, binary debates and unite people around long-term intergenerational goals. We aim to revitalise public diplomacy by championing deliberative dialogue and encouraging established and new leaders to work together to turn collective social challenges into opportunities. This includes telling stories and building movements around communities of interest and place.

# Creativity, Culture and Connection

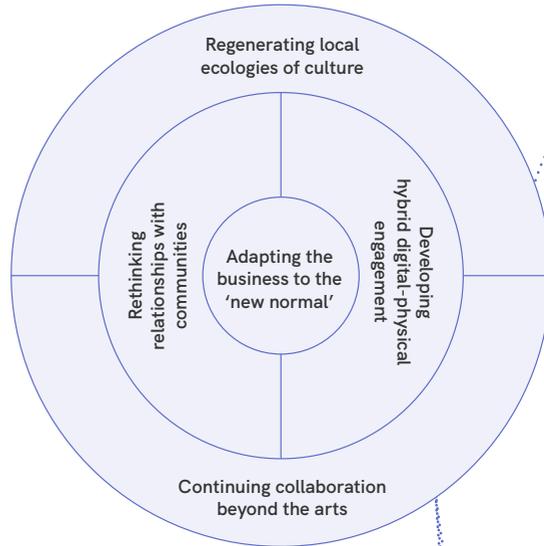
Responses from arts and culture organisations in the COVID-19 crisis

**RESEARCH METHODS**

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- Desk scan
- Mapping 200 organisations
- 34 interviews
- 5 local focus groups

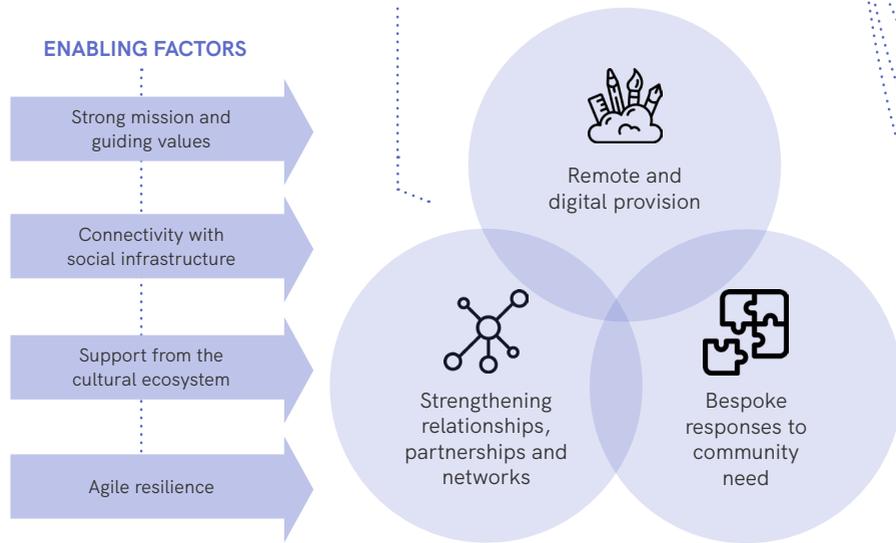
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**WIDER STRUCTURAL SUPPORT**

- Funding models
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- Empowering new models of dispersed leadership

# Foreword

ANDREW BARNETT, DIRECTOR,  
CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN FOUNDATION (UK BRANCH)

*“What - and **who** - are you for?”*

When we launched the Foundation’s work on the Civic Role of Arts Organisations in May 2016, we encouraged arts organisations to consider that question. Having a clear sense of purpose lies at the heart of human well-being; the same is true for organisations and all the more in a period of uncertainty.

We had been inspired by the growing number of arts organisations who had gone beyond the then dominant narrative of access and participation and were proving that excellence and engagement needn’t be in opposition. Arts organisations have an important role to play in sustaining individuals and communities and making places more creative, connected, and vibrant places to live and work. At the heart of our Civic Role programme is the belief that publicly funded institutions must articulate more clearly the value they bring to their communities and wider society. Our ambition has been to build a movement of creative change-makers, with impact in their local communities, across the UK and internationally.

There is a risk that the COVID-19 crisis - with its devastating impact across society and the arts and cultural sector being particularly affected - sets this ambition back as leaders understandably look for anchors rather than embracing fluidity. As this report highlights, organisations have not only had to navigate significant immediate challenges - including the impact of social distancing and lockdown measures on venues, artistic programming, and audience engagement - but also longer-term pressures of uncertainty. This, coupled with the need to redistribute resources to foster greater inclusion and diversity, has reignited the debate on what it means for arts organisations to be relevant to their communities.

At this incredibly challenging time, the principles behind our work on the Civic Role feel even more important. Some of the most inspiring responses to the crisis are those that are rooted in local needs and helping to develop community skills, capabilities, and creativity. They are encouraging discussion, helping to tell untold stories, and championing kindness and understanding of others.

This report demonstrates the extent to which many arts and cultural organisations have responded to the crisis with creative improvisation, reimagining and strengthening their civic role. In recent months, these organisations have boldly stepped into new territory, both online and offline in their local communities. We have seen them embrace co-creation, initiate cross-sector working, and pivot activities to reach new communities.

Funders too have their part to play in this new context, by offering more flexible and agile funding and encouraging greater partnership working. At the Foundation, one of our aspirations has been to help arts organisations ‘future proof’ by enabling them to respond to significant social, economic, and environmental trends by putting relationships, and the people they serve, ahead of their own existence. The organisations profiled in this report suggest that relevance is crucial to building resilience in the arts and culture sector.

But it is not just the immediate future we need to think of. The principles set out in the concluding chapter of this report help provide a useful template for ensuring a civic agenda is prioritised in the long term. It demonstrates how we can connect the ‘now’ with a strategic vision for the future; one which has communities at the centre of artistic practice and the arts at the centre of civic life.

# Author's Note

CAROLINE MACFARLAND, DIRECTOR, COMMON VISION

The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated vulnerabilities and entrenched existing fault lines across society. It is our belief at Common Vision that any positive recovery from the crisis, across any sector, will need to be grounded in a detailed understanding of what systems, institutions, and relationships served us and our communities well in the initial months of the pandemic.

For the arts and cultural sector, these initial months have been a time of deep instability and uncertainty, but also a time for collaboration, strategic thinking, and resetting values and priorities. Through interviews and focus groups we spoke to over 100 cultural practitioners around the UK to understand how the COVID-19 context has affected their work and future plans.

The immediate shock of the pandemic, and the social and economic implications of lockdown and social distancing which followed, provoked a range of responses that were specific to the types of organisations and the needs of their communities - but there are links and trends to be found both within specific places and across the sector. These responses will undoubtedly evolve as we face a 'long tail' of ongoing challenges and new social restrictions over the months ahead, and as we come to terms with the longer-term impacts on our lives. In spite of this uncertainty, what this report aims to provide is a snapshot picture of how arts and culture organisations have adapted and responded in the first five months of the pandemic, so that we can learn how to support and strengthen the role they have played in their communities moving forward.

This role goes far beyond digital and remote provision of creative experiences; while online engagement has been a factor in many organisations' responses to the crisis, but it is just one aspect of a much bigger picture. Our research has shone a light on the stories of creative solidarity, civic responsibility and public cultural value that arts organisations provide, contributing to vital social infrastructure and community resilience. These stories highlight both how arts organisations need active and engaged communities to thrive; and how individuals need

creativity and cultural experiences to lead connected and fulfilling lives. They demonstrate that what matters in the arts are not objects, events, or activities in isolation, but the web of relationships between people that make culture happen.

It is clear that the COVID-19 crisis has sparked significant rethinking, questioning and learning around mission and purpose for many arts organisations and individual artists. Looking forward to the short-term recovery and longer-term opportunities for more fundamental social and economic renewal, there will be a number of opportunities to 'lock-in' the principles that made cultural initiatives work well over lockdown, and to deepen relationships within and across local communities and cultural ecosystems. Understanding these trends will be important for policymakers, funders and of course sector leaders and practitioners themselves, and will help predict and formulate responses to the continued challenges and opportunities ahead. Through the pandemic old models of resilience, use and value have been unsettled, and new models are emerging. We hope this report stimulates conversations around what the cultural sector and others need to do to ensure arts organisations continue to provide vital social infrastructure in local communities, supporting individuals to realise their creativity and strengthening community resilience, within the context of a more inclusive cultural ecology that is fit for the future.

# Executive Summary

The COVID-19 crisis has had profound and lasting impacts across all sectors and segments of our society. This report builds a snapshot of how arts and cultural organisations have addressed the immediate challenges so far, the lessons that can be learned moving into the recovery, and the longer-term strategic opportunities to strengthen cultural democracy<sup>1</sup> and renew and reshape the role of arts and culture within our communities' broader social infrastructure<sup>2</sup> in the future.

Across our research - which included desk research and mapping, inductive interviews with leaders, funders and practitioners around the UK, and a series of place-based focus groups - it has been clear that arts organisations have been a vital part of communities' social support ecosystems during lockdown and the weeks and months which followed. Different arts organisations have adapted and responded in different ways and no single narrative would contain the breadth of consequences felt by the sector. Emerging within this diversity there are, however, a set of enabling factors, support models, and foundational principles that underpinned agile, sensitive, and successful responses to the initial stages of the pandemic. These responses demonstrate the social value of arts organisations within their communities despite ongoing uncertainty and tremendous financial pressure, and provide valuable lessons for new models of social resilience.

Across individual organisations' adaptations and responses to the pandemic, our research has shown that cultural work had a specialised role to play in sustaining creativity, hope, and human connection through lockdown, and developing human-centred, bottom-up, and imaginative solution to collective problems. Beyond the activities they provided, it is the web of relationships and partnerships that make and sustain culture that matters in a time of crisis. Organisations that were able to respond to the crisis rarely worked alone but relied upon sector-wide support systems and reciprocity with others in the cultural ecosystem and wider community.

As we look forward to the recovery phase of the pandemic, it is this specialised role within a community's social infrastructure, that arts organisations should seek to preserve and augment. Organisations that do survive the immediate economic crisis will almost certainly need to reimagine their role in society and local communities. There is a clear opportunity to 'bank' the relationships, approaches, and engagement models that worked during lockdown to catalyse the role of arts and culture within community, social and civic life.

How might the new relationships, collaborative models and delivery methods that have emerged from the crisis lead to systemic change in the future? To answer this question we have drawn on insights from previous work on the Civic Role of Arts Organisations, initiated by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, to examine what this role may look like in today's particular context. **Chapter One** sets out the rationale for the project and the methods used in further detail.

**Chapter Two** looks at how individual arts and culture organisations have responded so far to the crisis and its economic and social implications on the localities and communities in which they are based. Although it is clear the sector faces acute pressures, there are inspiring examples of the agile and responsive ways that arts organisations have demonstrated their role as wider place-shapers and connecting hubs, able to draw on hard and soft assets to respond to social need and support people during the crisis.

Through our research we have found that organisations have deployed their assets in three key ways: firstly by sustaining and adapting their existing public engagement to **support community creativity through remote, digital, and distanced provision**; secondly by developing **bespoke responses to community need**, like setting up food delivery systems; and thirdly by leveraging and **strengthening their relationships** both in the local cultural ecosystem and with wider civil society.

Often those that are most able to respond to the needs of their communities in this time of crisis are organisations that are already embedded within them, with strong relationships with people and local groups who might not immediately identify as their 'audience' or 'cultural consumers'. Our analysis has identified four headline enabling factors across the diversity of responses:

- **STRONG MISSION AND GUIDING VALUES** – Value-led organisations, those who already put social and community impact at the heart of the mission, found themselves better equipped to adapt to the crisis. Organisations' mission and values often manifested practically in agile governance models and representative workforces, which enabled them to understand and meet their community's new priorities at pace. They were also more likely to employ a relationship-centred approach to engagement that was well suited to sustaining connection within the specific conditions of the COVID-19 crisis.

- **CONNECTIVITY WITH OTHER SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE** – Organisations who were able to adapt most successfully to the pandemic saw their work as part of a wider social, cultural, and civic infrastructure within communities. When the crisis hit, they were able to mobilise their embedded social links with people, charities, community and voluntary groups, and harness their connectivity with their local communities of place. In situating their work within wider social infrastructure, they often leveraged the value of creativity within peoples' lives to develop bottom-up, relationship-driven, and human-centred responses to the crisis.
- **SUPPORT FROM THE CULTURAL ECOSYSTEM** – An individual organisation's adaptive response was shaped by the sector support it received. Organisations with flexible funders have been able to pivot and respond to emerging community needs in an agile way. Professional networks between cultural organisations have flourished during COVID-19 and the training, development, and resource sharing opportunities they provide were repeatedly cited by research participants. Where organisations, funders, and sector bodies have invested in cultural stewardship during the crisis, there is solid groundwork for these relationships to continue in the long term.
- **AGILE RESILIENCE** – Organisations who were most able to support their communities in the initial stages of the pandemic tended to benefit from stable core income (for example NPO funding) or be less reliant on earned income for other reasons. Low fixed costs and some, but not excessive, financial reserves were also beneficial - both very small unfunded organisations and large institutions often lacked the capacity to adapt quickly. Physical space and buildings were both assets and liabilities, presenting immediate operational pressures in some cases, and being adaptable to provide services such as food shops in others.

Many organisations we spoke to noted that recent months have been a time for experimentation and/ or reflection. Being forced to do things differently has led to considerations around what else could change in the future. At the same time, many of the challenges that arts organisations were responding to before the COVID-19 outbreak remain and have been made even more acute.

**Chapter Three** draws together the challenges and priorities for arts and culture practitioners as they look to the months ahead. These span from the very immediate challenges of preparing to reopen and adapting business models to the 'new normal', to leveraging the new relationships, collaborative models and delivery methods that have emerged during the crisis for the future. Our analysis highlights the interdependent nature of individual organisations within a wider ecology of culture. Whilst smaller and mid-sized organisations were quick to respond to the specific social challenges of the COVID-19 context, in the months ahead larger organisations may have an increasing role to play in deploying their assets and networks to sustain and rebuild the cultural ecosystems in which they sit.

In addition to the interdependencies within the arts and cultural sector, arts organisations and individual artists alike are increasingly recognising the crucial role they play within a community's social infrastructure. Having worked with community groups, health commissioners, housing providers and more to ensure people have continued to live full cultural lives during lockdown, there are a number of opportunities to build on these partnerships. Pooling knowledge, resources and funding with other arts and non-arts organisations – whether public, charitable, commercial or voluntary – will strengthen cultural organisations' collective value and resilience in the COVID-19 recovery.

The potential for continued adaptation, innovation and collaboration as described above may only be successful if implemented alongside wider structural support in the short-to-medium term. From our interviews and focus groups we found particular demand for:

- **NEW APPROACHES TO LEADERSHIP** need to be enabled and supported. Many leaders of arts organisations have been isolated and under-capacity during lockdown. Yet at the same time, it has also been an opportunity for leaders to analyse the purpose of their work, strengthen their networks and reappraise their organisation's social impact. Support could include tailored guidance on how to meaningfully connect with their specific communities and build sustainable, collaborative relationships with community leaders and coaching to translate commitments to diversity and equality into practice. Crucially, this support needs to reach beyond traditional organisational 'leaders', to think about who has emerged as leaders in the COVID-19 context, and who will be best equipped to lead in the future.

- **FUNDING MODELS** which help 'bake in' the positive lessons from the COVID-19 context and support local cultural ecosystems to thrive. The Government's £1.57 billion Cultural Recovery Fund rescue package for the arts, culture and heritage industries announced in July 2020 was welcomed by all we spoke to. However, as a short-term funding package, focused on the current financial year, it may not support the bold long-term reimagining work the sector needs. Public funders, private philanthropists, investors and commissioners could consider how their funding encourages partnership working and consortium bids, enables devolved funding for artists, and catalyses further testing of new imaginative delivery models.
- **WIDENING ACCESS TO CULTURAL ECOSYSTEMS** will be crucial as it becomes increasingly clear even at the early stages of the recovery that not all organisations will survive. Many staff within the arts sector, particularly front-of-house and low-income staff have already lost their jobs. Public bodies and sector support networks will need to consider their duty of care towards these individuals and organisations who are affected.

A common thread running through our conversations highlighted the levels of uncertainty and how this affects the ability to plan ahead. Yet although uncertainty can hinder the ability to be creativity ambitious and think strategically, it also opens up a space of potential where ideas that once seemed impossible are now within reach. At the end of this chapter we explore how some of these principles may work in practice, through five local case studies in **Norwich, Sheffield, Durham, Hull** and the **London Borough of Newham**.

**Chapter Four** looks at the longer-term challenges and opportunities which may emerge in the post-COVID social and economic landscape, and what this means for the strategic mission and purpose of arts organisations.

In these times of rapid structural shifts the arts have a specialised role to play in fuelling and inspiring public storytelling, taking on a 'civic imaginary' role in local communities and national debate. We present three scenarios - based around high street regeneration, wellbeing policy, and the changing world of work - as examples of how the arts and culture sector can help form brave and bold public solutions that are grounded in long-term perspectives of environmental sustainability and social resilience. More will emerge as further consequences from the pandemic come to light.

Harnessing the longer-term opportunities to reshape our cultural and social lives can only happen alongside a shift in practice that is embedded within arts organisations themselves. Being able to plan ahead amidst ongoing uncertainty requires an iterative and open-ended approach based on a bedrock of principles and values rather than timelines and outputs. In the concluding **Chapter Five** we outline a set of foundational principles which may help arts organisations stay purposeful in the context of wider social shifts, and engrain recent lessons into organisational operations, strategy, partnerships, and decision-making structures:

- **VALUING CULTURE AS SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE, NOT INSTITUTIONS** – It is increasingly evident that many arts organisations have the relationships, resources, and expertise that form a vital part of ‘soft’ infrastructure in communities. The true value of this role requires thinking beyond individual institutions and becoming more porous so that creative endeavours are synonymous with wider social good.
- **PRIORITISING CO-CREATION, NOT OUTREACH** – Disruption of existing public programmes and activities may present a chance to take stock and deeply embed co-creation methods into future work. Radical new inclusive and collaborative approaches are needed to creatively develop solutions to the shared problems we face as a society. Therefore, embedding co-creation doesn’t just mean changing the way that organisations design standalone programmes, but a more fundamental reassessment of how they work, and who they work with.
- **EMPOWERING NEW MODELS OF DISPERSED LEADERSHIP** – If a new, more diverse generation of cultural leaders is emerging – through localised responses to the pandemic but also due to the resurgence of national conversations like the Black Lives Matter movement – there is an important chance to not only be more representative of our communities, but share power more equitably. The crisis has demonstrated that there is a practical and strategic, as well as a moral, case to be made for these new models of dispersed leadership and shared ownership.

These three principles can be applied by a range of actors, from individual practitioners to sector bodies, to shape a recovery that meaningfully responds to communities’ and organisations’ experiences during the pandemic. By learning from the lessons of the crisis there is not only the opportunity to rebuild a more socially resilient cultural sector; but enrich and uplift communities’ collective civic lives through the wider economic and social recovery.

# 1. Introduction

The economic and social disruption caused by COVID-19 will have a profound and lasting effect on all sectors and segments of our society. This report explores the ways in which arts and cultural organisations have navigated the immediate challenges affecting their operational models and the communities they serve; their concerns and priorities moving into the recovery, and the longer-term opportunities to renew and reshape sector infrastructure and the role of culture within communities' social infrastructure in the future.

Our research has aimed to build a 'snapshot' picture of responses so far and how arts and cultural organisations are preparing to adapt to a 'new normal'. In many respects it may be too early to assess the impact of the crisis on the sector. As the situation stabilises there will continue to be profound implications for the working arrangements and operations of individual organisations, as well as relationships and partnerships within and across wider cultural ecosystems. Understanding these immediate trends will be important for the response from policymakers, funders and of course sector leaders and practitioners themselves.

We have used a three-part framework to examine views, reflections and actions from the organisations and individuals who participated in our research:

- **ADAPTING TO CRISIS** – How arts and culture organisations have responded so far to the pandemic and its economic and social implications;
- **ROUTES TO STABILISATION** – How sector leaders and practitioners are preparing for potential developments in the year or two ahead, and their key concerns about the immediate future;
- **STRATEGIC FUTURES** – The longer-term challenges and opportunities which may emerge in the post-COVID social and economic landscape, and what this means for the strategic mission and purpose of arts organisations.

Amidst tremendous pressure and uncertainty, many arts organisations are already using the current context as an opportunity to strengthen their social purpose and shape positive outcomes in their local places. Often those that are most able to respond to the needs of their

communities in this time of crisis are organisations that are already embedded within them, with strong relationships with people and local groups who might not immediately identify as their ‘audience’ or ‘cultural consumers’. To understand how the new relationships and ways of working that emerged in the crisis may seed systemic change, we have drawn on insights from previous work on the Civic Role of Arts Organisations, initiated by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. The programme, initiated in 2016, used best practice examples to promote awareness of the civic role arts organisations play nationally and in their communities - who they serve and how - and create a movement of arts organisations committed to working in this way.

#### WHAT DOES A CIVIC ROLE LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation’s Inquiry into the Civic Role of Arts and Culture Organisations formulated a typology of civic roles using five metaphors which describe arts organisations as:



‘COLLEGES’  
Places of learning



‘TOWN HALLS’  
Places of debate



‘PARKS’  
Public spaces



‘TEMPLES’  
Places which give meaning  
and provide solace



‘HOME’  
Places of safety  
and belonging

Demonstrating a strong ‘civic role’ takes different forms in different places, and includes fostering community cohesion, learning, public debate, social inclusion, wellbeing and belonging - often at a local or hyperlocal level. The programme found a number of shared operating

principles amongst organisations that work in this way, including a civic mission that is embedded in the leadership and governance of an organisation; strong local roots and relationships with community partners; community agency and participation in determining the artistic programme; diversity and openness to challenge; and the commitment(s) to developing community skills and building social capital alongside artistic excellence. In this sense, cultivating the civic role of the arts is important for realising Arts Council England’s wider national strategy and vision for creative lives and communities set out in their 2020-2030 strategy “Let’s Create”.

These themes are more relevant now than ever in thinking about how arts organisations are preparing for the post-COVID world, from responding to the needs of their audiences and communities, to thinking about the longer-term systems change that might be possible.

We hope that this work will provide an evidence base and positive stories that will showcase the social and civic impact of arts organisations to others outside of the sector, as well as inspiring best practice amongst their peers. This work could also provide a basis for follow up studies at later dates into what sorts of foundations/ early interventions proved successful for organisational resilience and impact in the longer-term.

## Methodology

From May to July 2020 Common Vision employed a mixed method, qualitative research approach, starting with a **desk scan and literature review** of existing resources, studies and articles and a **mapping exercise** of activities undertaken by arts organisations varying in size, structure, funding model, geographical location across the UK. Through purposeful sampling we mapped the work of over 200 arts organisations and their responses to the pandemic. We then extrapolated key trends in how organisations are responding to the crisis and established a typology to account for the top-level changes organisations have experienced and actions they have taken through the pandemic to date. This typology included: Business model shifts; Digital engagement; Remote provision of activities; Provision of new community services; Extended relationships and partnerships; Supporting artists and freelancers; and Sharing information and signposting resources.

From here we conducted **34 semi-structured depth interviews** with representatives of arts organisations around the UK, covering a variety of these typological responses as well as diversity in terms of artistic discipline, location turnover and size, and contextual factors in relation to the communities in which they work.

Alongside these individual depth interviews we conducted **five local focus groups in Hull, County Durham, Norwich, Sheffield, and the London Borough of Newham** to seek to understand how local arts ecosystems are adapting in specific areas. In each location we worked with a local partner to convene a group of participants which represented a cross-section of arts and community organisations. The five locations were selected to obtain a variety of perspectives in terms of rural/urban context, local authority model, economic status, historic investment in the arts, and local demographics.

We are also grateful for the insights generated from an **advisory meeting** in June 2020, which helped shape the research typology and our subsequent analysis.





# 2. Adapting to crisis: The cultural response to COVID-19 in local communities

Our research and conversations with individual artists and sector leaders around the UK - as well as funders, commissioners and others involved in supporting these organisations - has emphasised the tremendous pressure which arts and culture organisations are currently facing, with many in crisis or just surviving the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Different arts organisations are undergoing different challenges. Some are unique to their local context, whilst others are shared with organisations of similar sizes, disciplines, and funding structures. Some organisations have been able to adapt their activities both online and offline in local communities, while others have largely furloughed staff and 'mothballed' existing plans. Some are currently preparing to reopen while others face disruption for months to come. A common thread running through our conversations highlighted the levels of uncertainty and how this affects the ability to plan ahead past the very immediate short-term response.

That said, a number of organisations we spoke to noted that recent months have been a time for experimentation and/ or reflection. Being forced to do things differently has led to considerations around what else could change in the future. Some of our interviewees noted that the crisis has made them see that they were working in a way that wasn't sustainable and didn't serve their communities effectively, while many mentioned that having a bit of breathing space from delivery has been valuable for them to take a step back and think more strategically about their future.

*"One of the best things I think is going to come out of this crisis is that we might think a little harder about what we're making and who we are making it for. And if that means that some of the most self-indulgent, self-reflective, esoteric work is challenged, then that's a good thing."*

— Gavin Stride, Director, Farnham Maltings

*"I've felt more able to horizon scan and engage nationally through COVID-19. Normally as a Director of a small organisation that's delivering festivals, you're often in your wellies with your hi-vis on, so there's no hierarchy at all. And because I've not had those demands on me it's enabled me to operate more strategically."*

— Tina Redford, Director, LeftCoast

Our interviews and focus groups asked participants to reflect on the ways they had responded and adapted to the initial stages of the pandemic.

## BUREAU FOR THE ARTS: USING THE LOCKDOWN TO REFLECT AND PLAN FRESH APPROACHES

The Bureau for the Arts is a vibrant arts centre in the heart of Blackburn, providing versatile space for arts activities, theatre, music, cultural events and community participation. 2019 was a challenging year for the arts organisation as they were forced to relocate their activities to a new venue after a fire broke out at their long-term home.

For the first month of lockdown, they chose to pause activities. This gave the collective the opportunity to re-group, reflect and plan for the future. A number of positive initiatives emerged in the second and third months of the lockdown as a result. In May 2020 the Bureau co-ordinated their annual 'Paint the Town' event online. This encouraged people to keep safe and create artwork at home instead of outdoors which created new and fresh perspectives of the town. The art works are being shared on a big screen in the town centre and a series of short films have been commissioned.

"It's given us the opportunity to think and plan ahead," reflects Cath Ford, Community Artist, Bureau for the Arts. "We have been having conversations with people and community partners that we may not have had before, including with new people, and children and young people and their families. Taking the time to step away, reflect and come back again has really opened up possibilities for us in terms of our future planning."

[www.bureaublackburn.co.uk](http://www.bureaublackburn.co.uk)

The vast majority of our research participants have changed their working arrangements, business model and existing activities in some way (although we would note that organisations which have paused all delivery as a result of closing venues and furloughed staff were also less likely to be able to be able to participate in the research as a result of this).

Responses spanned from changing provision of artistic and community activities, using new methods to engage existing audiences and reach out to new audiences, working to address specific community needs, and building new partnerships and local collaborations. We also examined the ways in which organisations have considered diversity and inclusion, supported individual artists, and the infrastructure, relationships and funding models that have enabled these responses.

## Supporting community creativity through remote and digital provision

The vast majority arts organisations we spoke to had continued to engage and interact with both existing and new audiences during lockdown. Many organisations, upon closing venues or cancelling face to face activities, have proactively turned online activities and/or the distribution of creative packs as a way to continue engagement with existing

## HOW HAVE ARTS ORGANISATIONS USED CREATIVE PACKS TO SUSTAIN COMMUNITY CREATIVITY DURING LOCKDOWN?

Many cultural organisations responded to lockdown with the distribution and delivery of creative packs, which aimed to foster community wellbeing through connection, imagination and play. Examples include:

**ART COUNCIL ENGLAND'S** Let's Create packs were delivered to 25,000 children and young people across the country by local bridge organisations via food banks and voluntary networks. [www.artscouncil.org.uk/toolkits/lets-create-packs-social-toolkit](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/toolkits/lets-create-packs-social-toolkit)

**ARTSEKTRA** (Belfast, Northern Ireland) adapted their educational programme into The One World Box which contains materials and activities for learning about different cultures through lockdown. To date they have delivered 2,000 boxes mainly in partnership with social housing agencies, as well as schools and community groups working in areas of high deprivation. [www.artsekta.org.uk](http://www.artsekta.org.uk)

**DON'T GET ANY IDEAS** (Corby, Northamptonshire, a Creative Civic Change area) delivered creative activities in cloth bags around their neighbourhood every fortnight. They used a WhatsApp chat to set the activities and share the results. [www.localtrust.org.uk/news-and-stories/blog/keeping-communities-connected-with-creative-packs](http://www.localtrust.org.uk/news-and-stories/blog/keeping-communities-connected-with-creative-packs)

**GREATER CREATIVE** (Blackwell, Derbyshire, a Creative Civic Change area) designed 'Create a Crest', where 440 households used their daily walk to collect a clay tile to decorate with their own family crest which, after lockdown, will be installed on plaques in each village as a physical legacy of lockdown. [www.facebook.com/GreaterCreative](http://www.facebook.com/GreaterCreative)

**TAKE A PART** (Plymouth, Devon) devised Creative Making Packs with local schools and delivered them to the families of frontline workers. The first task was to create maps of local social distancing walks that were then shared online and in school windows so that community members could suggest routes too. [www.takeapart.org.uk](http://www.takeapart.org.uk)

**THE AUXILIARY** (Middlesbrough, North Yorkshire) delivered 100 disposable cameras to local residents as part of their ABODE project. The camera film was developed by a local photographer and sent back to participants as post cards. The results will also be exhibited when the gallery reopens. [www.theauxiliary.co.uk/projects/abode](http://www.theauxiliary.co.uk/projects/abode)

**THE PORTLAND INN PROJECT** (Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent; Creative Civic Change area) supported families by providing creative packs and clay deliveries. They ensured the safety of these deliveries by installing a community post box and creating quarantine zones in letterboxes. One of the activities included creating ceramic pigeons, decorated and glazed by local people. The pigeons will be sold, as chimney decorations, to raise money for the community centre. [www.theportlandinnproject.tumblr.com](http://www.theportlandinnproject.tumblr.com)

## HIJINX: DEEPENING ONLINE PROVISION

Based in Cardiff, Hijinx is a professional theatre production company which delivers professional training for actors with learning disabilities. Their work tours to theatres, festivals and communities in UK and Europe. When the pandemic hit, Hijinx created a successful Slack channel, and this, combined with weekly video calls, has enabled them to continue to support the majority of their actors. Hijinx have developed their digital capabilities and skills to ensure that their online engagement is safe, supportive and welcoming. "It started out as just a check in, and now it's a learning, development and creative space," explains Sarah Horner, Chief Executive.

By working through these platforms, Hijinx produced their first online festival *Hijinx Online/Ar-lein*. Hijinx is confident that the closing production of *The Matthew Purnell Show* had the largest neurologically divergent cast ever achieved in theatre production. "It's been amazing to see the work of our actors streamed around the world" says Sarah. "The stats tell us that it wasn't just reaching our usual audiences or people in the arts watching work by people in the arts. It was reaching an international audience."

[www.hijinx.org.uk/news/2020/04/22/hijinx-presents-its-first-online-festival/](http://www.hijinx.org.uk/news/2020/04/22/hijinx-presents-its-first-online-festival/)

audiences to continue their engagement with existing audiences and communities. Over 40% of the organisations we mapped through our desk research showed immediately apparent evidence (on their websites and social media) of shifting their activities online in response to COVID-19 lockdown. Those who have not directly provided their own alternative activities have often signposted people to other mainstream national online resources and activities that enable people get creative in their own home. For example, **Fun Palaces' #TinyRevolutions of Connection** and **64 Million Artists' Create to Connect challenges** have been widely shared.

The use of digital has been both positive and a cause for concern amongst practitioners, with widespread recognition of the benefits of providing creative experiences for people in a time of unprecedented physical isolation, and the ability to reach new audiences with a diversified offer. However, there are simultaneous worries around digital exclusion of some groups, including those who were already the most vulnerable and isolated. Not all people have the technology or broadband connection needed to keep connected online. Some organisations have got around this by securing grants to buy tablets to loan to their participants. Digital ambivalence has been another barrier to engagement, with many suffering from screen fatigue and felt that digital connection did not adequately replace face-to-face connection.

There is also a broad spectrum in terms of the drivers and rationale behind these digital or remote offers, from providing an

'alternative' to conventional artistic content, to designing and providing something new in response to the unique experiences and needs which people and communities face as part of the lockdown. While in some cases the responses from arts organisations are embedded in a social mission to encourage relationships, foster learning or support wellbeing, in others the provision of online back catalogues or activity packs seem less integrated with a wider strategy and social purpose.

## TAKE A PART: A PURPOSEFULLY ANALOGUE APPROACH TO REMOTE ENGAGEMENT

Take A Part is a community arts organisation in Plymouth which aims to foster community cohesion through creativity. They specialise in socially engaged audience development and pioneer long-term, embedded co-production and co-commissioning processes with people historically underserved by the arts. In lockdown, they launched *Coxside Echoes*, a community magazine by and for the people of Coxside. "The magazine is something that is tangible and people can see physically, at a time when much activity has moved online," explains Director Kim Wide. "The digital divide is quite marked in local communities. We've been finding ways to be analogue at a time of digital."

The magazine engaged local designers, journalists and activists and paid them for their input and expertise. It has drawn particular interest from older members of the community and given them an opportunity to feed into artist commissions and briefs. To capture this engagement Take a Part has followed up with telephone calls and door-knocking. The magazine sits alongside a wider portfolio of work during lockdown which includes creating and distributing creative packs, coordinating beach cleans, delivering supplies to isolating neighbours, and running online support sessions for local artists.

[www.takeapart.org.uk/projects/coxside-echoes](http://www.takeapart.org.uk/projects/coxside-echoes)

## ROUNDHOUSE: #ROUNDYOURHOUSE

The Roundhouse is a live performance space in North London with a commitment to supporting young people to engage with the arts through music, media and performance projects. To coincide with the temporary closure of the venue, the Roundhouse put together a pack that includes free Adobe Creative Cloud, tech support and resources for young studio members, alongside a series of online events, podcasts, films and home schooling resources. Targeted at young members 11-25 and creative freelancers and entrepreneurs aged 18-30, these materials clearly align with the Roundhouse's mission supporting young creatives.

[www.roundhouse.org.uk/home/round-your-house/](http://www.roundhouse.org.uk/home/round-your-house/)

“Families have wanted more from us over lockdown. The parents have told us that after their kids do an online session with us, they are back to being themselves and happy again. However beyond the theatre and acting that the online classes sustain, it is the in-person relationships and the shared space that they are missing.” — Karen Metcalfe, Artistic Director and Chief Executive, Burnley Youth Theatre

However, some organisations have found it difficult to adapt in these ways because their activities are tied to a physical asset, while others work with communities who are less able to engage remotely or digitally. The organisations that have been able to extend provision online and remotely are not yet clear on how these models will be reflected in revenue or a more significant business model shift. Although digital and remote provision has allowed organisations to experiment with new engagement techniques, this doesn't replace real-life interaction, nor is there a clear route to making these interventions sustainable in the future, meaning the digital shift may not be reflected in more significant business model shifts moving forward.

“As a small organisation it's been different adapting and has really emphasised how rooted we are to our physical gallery space. It has been a challenge to think about how we can programme digitally that still is as effective and impactful as before.” — David McLeavy, Director, Bloc Project

“Some organisations, because of the nature of their work or their participants' circumstances, can't move online. There isn't a digital replacement. So, it's worth asking about those who can't diversify into digital as a part of their portfolio. This has been a particular challenge for some organisations working with people in prison.” — Rebecca Hammond, Project Manager, National Criminal Justice Arts Alliance

## Developing bespoke responses to community need

Beyond using new delivery mediums and channels of communication to engage existing audiences as well as reach new target groups with a

### **EDEN COURT: DELIVERING THE HUMANITARIAN AID CENTRE FOR THE HIGHLANDS**

Eden Court is Scotland's largest combined arts organisation, presenting and making work with, by and for the people of the Highlands and Islands and visitors to the area.

Since closing its buildings in response to COVID-19, Eden Court has repurposed itself as part of Highland Council's community response, transforming its main stage into the Humanitarian Aid Centre for the Highlands. Many of its ticket sales and Visitor Experience team members are running the Council's Helpline from their homes. Members of the Engagement team have been supporting creative teaching and learning in the Key Worker Childcare Hubs. Beyond their work with the Council, Eden Court staff have been calling regular audience members, many of whom are older people, to check-in, see how they are, and to reassure them that Eden Court will return. “We've become embedded as part of Highland Council's resilience and humanitarian response,” says James Mackenzie Blackman, Chief Executive. “The staff have been amazing and I am very proud of the support we have been able to provide to our communities and audiences.”

[www.eden-court.co.uk](http://www.eden-court.co.uk)

### **FARNHAM MALTINGS: USING CULTURAL SKILLS AND CONNECTIONS TO CO-ORDINATE THE LOCAL CRISIS RESPONSE**

Farnham Maltings is a cultural organisation based in Surrey who exist to contribute to the quality of peoples' lives across the town. Normally they run a mixed programme of craft and performance, alongside supporting regional touring theatre with team expertise, and local voluntary arts groups with their space.

In response to COVID-19 they decided to continue to focus on their mission of improving life and wellbeing in Farnham through radically different ways. Staff applied their participatory engagement skills and existing relationships to coordinating the local area's practical crisis response. They worked with the council and bought together 550 volunteers and a wide range of local partners to deliver food, pick up prescriptions, and provide emotional support locally. They also set up a crisis solidarity fund for local residents which raised £36,000 in four hours, and two community stores in local estates where people could donate and borrow games to keep their families entertained in lockdown.

“Our approach was based on three key principles: don't duplicate work; keep everything as local as possible; and develop relationships and a culture of neighbourliness that can outlive the crisis,” says Director Gavin Stride. “For us, this was second-nature because of our expertise in participatory arts. I wasn't interested in kind of a rescue model in which you create a kind of charitable dependency; this is about encouraging generosity.”

[www.farnhammaltings.com/about/coordinating-community-support](http://www.farnhammaltings.com/about/coordinating-community-support)

creative and artistic 'offer', a number of organisations have made more significant changes to their activities in order to respond to local need. Some have used their buildings, workforce infrastructure, and community connections to take on a role coordinating community mutual aid, food distribution and practical care for their communities during lockdown. In some cases, arts organisations have taken on a formal role through local council contracts, in others the response has been more informal.

#### HOW HAVE ARTS AND CULTURE ORGANISATIONS DEMONSTRATED A CIVIC ROLE IN THEIR COMMUNITY RESPONSES?

The variety of responses from arts organisations span a range of issues and demonstrate the extent to which many arts organisations are vital social infrastructure embedded in their local communities.



Provision of activities and services which combat loneliness, isolation, and seek to improve wellbeing.



Delivery of creative educational resources for children and families.



Mobilising staff, individual artists and creative practitioners to get involved in the COVID-19 response.



Using 'hard assets' such as spaces, buildings, and vehicles to support or deliver mutual aid interventions such as food banks, healthcare support services or community kitchens.



Using 'soft assets' such as social networks and trusted relationships to support or deliver community activities.

Some organisations have focused more heavily on practical community support than cultural provision during these difficult times, while others have blended creative activities with this support – for example by distributing creative packs with food parcels. Across the spectrum of responses, it is clear that many arts organisations are important elements of the social infrastructure in local communities, with important hard and soft assets to draw on which support community resilience.

"Amateur arts groups have demonstrated the extent to which they form part of the social fabric of their communities. Many have responded by both looking after their own members, but also their wider community. It's the fact that the group exists as a fairly secure social entity that then allows it to be used in a time of crisis for all sorts of things."

— Robin Simpson, Chief Executive, Voluntary Arts

## Strengthening relationships, partnerships and networks

Partnership working has been key to the success of agile and impactful responses from arts organisations in their communities - from developing stronger networks and new alliances with other creative or cultural organisations, to maintaining and building connections with local organisations beyond the arts sector.

Many of the organisations we spoke with have worked with other local voluntary and community organisations either informally or formally, and developed relationships with local authorities.

"There has been a real coming together across the local arts ecosystem. For instance our festival's mentoring group used to meet every three months and its currently meeting weekly. Sheffield Culture Consortium has also shifted to weekly meetings. That has been an amazing support for everyone."

— Sara Unwin, Head of Cultural Engagement, University of Sheffield

## NOW THEN: AMPLIFYING CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS IN SHEFFIELD

Now Then is a free, independent magazine produced by Opus and published in Sheffield. Now Then supports independence in art, trade and citizen journalism. Local people are encouraged to contribute to the magazine, whatever their skills or experience, and each edition is built around artwork from a different featured artist. Having developed a mobile and tablet app a year ago, they were able to quickly shift all of their content to digital channels. More fundamentally, the magazine has found a new role as a 'crisis communicator' for the local voluntary and community sector.

Through a partnership with Voluntary Action Sheffield, the magazine has aimed to amplify awareness of local services, and share stories from volunteers and people receiving support. For instance, in June they took over the management of Citizen Advice Sheffield's social media channels to help spread awareness of Citizens Advice's changing service offer, as well as share the stories of lived experience told by their volunteers and service recipients.

[www.nowthenmagazine.com](http://www.nowthenmagazine.com) / [www.weareopus.org](http://www.weareopus.org)

## EMERGENCY EXIT ARTS: TEMO TV LOCKDOWN BROADCASTS

Emergency Exit Arts is an established outdoor theatre company. In May, EEA launched TEMO TV in partnership with Peabody Trust, Thamesmead Now, Bow Arts, and residents of Thamesmead. The weekly lockdown broadcast is streamed on YouTube and created by, with and for the people of Thamesmead. Describing itself as "punk magazine show meets X-Factor where digital will transform into real life analogue", the production empowers young trainee producers and members of the community to develop their production skills.

EEA has seen increased engagement overall as a result of this new offer, particularly amongst young people. By strengthening this partnership approach across Thamesmead through lockdown, EEA have continued to engage the community hybrid digital-physical activities; connected with new residents around specific causes like Black Lives Matter; and continued working towards the partnership's long-term strategic aim of diversifying the sector through training young producers.

[www.eea.org.uk/whats-on/events/temo-tv](http://www.eea.org.uk/whats-on/events/temo-tv)

Some of the most successful collaborations seem to be cross-sector where partnerships have enabled activities to be focused on specific needs or at-risk groups.

While stronger local partnerships and networks have been a notable positive for many, there is undoubtedly a variation of experience. In some cases, existing relationships have been put under strain as community partners have had to focus attention on emergency work rather than creative engagement.

"Though we're working at a very reduced capacity, through volunteering we have managed to still support our community of makers and, alongside other colleagues and companies, have established the 'Migrants in Theatre' network. Migrants, artists or otherwise, have been acutely and distinctly affected by COVID-19. Instead of delivery, we've been focusing on advocacy, activism, and network-building."

— Lora Krasteva, Founder, Global Voices Theatre

To a large extent it may be too early to tell how many of these new relationships will be 'baked in' at a strategic level in future – although practitioners noted that partnerships during the pandemic may set a strong precedent and help make the case to arts funders and local government of the value that wider community partnerships can bring.

"We find ourselves in a network of tiny local organisations. If I had sat down with funders previously and said it is part of our strategy to build these relationships, they would have thought I was mad."

— Alan Lane, Artistic Director, Slung Low

"As a result of our activities during lockdown, we now have established a partnership with South Yorkshire Housing Association, through which we will continue to reach parts of the community we wouldn't usually have reached." — Jo Towler, Executive Director, Music in the Round

There are also examples of how the COVID-19 crisis has catalysed or strengthened partnerships beyond a place-based focus, mobilising creative communities around social causes such as homelessness, mental health, or the environment on a more national basis.

"Working online has been positive for the Culture Declares movement, it got rid of the confines of geography (we were in danger of becoming London-centric) and enabled people who were watching from the edges to step into the centre." — Polly Gifford, Culture Declares Emergency

“We’ve always promoted everyday creativity and its positive influence on mental wellbeing and, even before COVID-19, many of our creative challenge participants were housebound for various health reasons. This time has been a great opportunity for us to use our tried and tested models to support new communities to get creative, connect online and feel part of something bigger.” — Laura Saxton, Programme Manager, 64 Million Artists

However, in relation to both local and national relationships, there is notable asymmetry between the experiences of arts organisations, and that of individual artists, creative practitioners and freelancers, a number of whom indicated a sense of disconnection with conventional arts infrastructure. Many arts organisations have been purposefully supporting individuals during the crisis, by creating support programmes or mentoring sessions for artist and freelancers, or developing micro-commissions to engage artists in specific COVID-19 responses. However effective responses vary widely, and may be failing to reach freelancers who do not usually practice in one geographical area or have existing local connections. This may indicate a potentially **untapped** pool of energy, resource and talent during the COVID-19 crisis.

“As a freelancer it has been a weird time, I would have been working all over the country usually. I don’t think I could sustain my career locally and I had to reorient myself around what I can do in my immediate area. So that’s something to address; how to build those connections locally with other individuals like myself.” — Bethany Wells, Independent performance designer

### WITH ONE VOICE: EMBEDDING THE ARTS INTO HOMELESSNESS SERVICES THROUGH PARTNERSHIP WORKING

As a result of COVID-19 crisis 95% of homeless people were moved into hotels, but left isolated and without shared spaces. With One Voice (WOV), the international arts and homelessness movement which works to embed the arts and creativity into homelessness services, already had the networks, connections and reputation to respond effectively to these needs.

They gathered examples of good practice happening in the sector and set about creating resources, amplifying work and running projects. In London, they worked with Union Chapel and Museum of Homelessness to create a guide of how cultural spaces’ and staff could respond to homelessness during COVID-19. Meanwhile, a project to bring books, assisted reading and art to people who were homeless in hotels was taking place through a partnership between Cardboard Citizens, Accumulate, St. Mungo’s and The Reader - this was expanded to 16 other hotels. They have also catalysed impact through their international networks with similar projects being set up in Los Angeles, Seattle and Japan.

Across the initiatives they have maintained a commitment to co-production - the charity itself has 50% representation of people who have been homeless on the board and staff. In Haringey and Coventry they helped plan projects through co-production, asking residents what kind of projects they wanted to get involved in. This has resulted in a high level of engagement - 75% of those in Housing First accommodation in Coventry participated in arts activities during lockdown. To take in the power of these partnerships With One Voice have established the Advocacy, Research and Training (ART)Lab, a virtual laboratory which seeks to further understand and advance creativity within homelessness services in future.

[www.with-one-voice.com](http://www.with-one-voice.com)

### B ARTS: COMMISSIONING LOCAL ARTISTS TO TELL COMMUNITY STORIES

B arts is an arts and creative education charity based on Stoke-on-Trent. Its mission is to provide cultural experiences for people who would not usually engage in the arts. Alongside delivering food parcels and signposting support services, B arts created a set of micro-commissions called CARE: Co-Creation Research and Development Commissions. The commissions helped a group of artists to lead street art interventions in a local housing estate. Two artists collected stories from care home residents and turned this into a piece of telephone theatre. Other artists told the story of objects at home. B arts is planning to turn this into a wider co-produced piece of work in the Autumn.

“We wanted to give our artists a focus for processing and responding to the things they were going through, feeling, and thinking about during the lockdown” explains Susan Clarke, Artistic Director, B arts. “But it was also that practical thing of just giving somebody some work. When you’ve got a community of creatives around you, it’s so important to stay in touch and continue to support people to be a creative and artistic community.”

[www.b-arts.org.uk/care](http://www.b-arts.org.uk/care)

### YOUNG VIC: DEEPENING COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS THROUGH CLOSURE

Based off London's South Bank, the Young Vic produces a wide range of work attracting audiences from many different backgrounds. It has strong links with its local community and specialises in nurturing emerging theatre artists. It has a staff team of over 50 people and a turnover of £7million, earning £2.14 for every £1 given in subsidy. When theatres were asked to close, the Young Vic furloughed almost all their staff team. However, driven by the belief that participation and community are at the core of their work, they made the decision to keep three members of their engagement and artistic development departments working.

A relationship and partnership-centred approach to participation shaped Young Vic's response to COVID-19. For instance, they built their existing close collaborations with local social, health and community partners, from the learning disability charity Certitude to the homelessness charity Thames Reach, by providing practical support with food deliveries. Their Directors Programme moved to a daily offer of online workshops and events which provided a highly valued space to keep freelance directors supported and connected to the industry and each other.

This ongoing community activity enabled the Young Vic to understand their communities' and partners' new needs and priorities. This includes both a fear among their younger participants that the theatre industry will become more inaccessible to them, and a strong desire for deepened community connections and shared civic space. Based on this understanding, the Young Vic have been able to design a responsive and participatory re-opening programme, with a flagship outdoors installation 'The Unforgotten' which celebrates Black trailblazers, as well as an offer for local schools that responds to the specific needs placed on students by the uncertainty and emotional challenges of lockdown.

[www.youngvic.org](http://www.youngvic.org)

### ARTSEKTA: BRINGING CULTURAL DIVERSITY INTO A DIGITAL SPACE

Based in Belfast in Northern Ireland, ArtsEkta (Ekta meaning Uniting in the Indian language) is a social enterprise and arts charity based which brings together the communities of Belfast and beyond. Alongside other projects, ArtsEkta produce the largest celebration of cultural diversity on the island of Ireland, the one-day Belfast Mela festival, which normally attracts over of 30,000 visitors. The COVID-19 context meant that the live festival had to be adapted into a virtual event, entitled *Mela at Home*, with over 50 digital events across music, dance, food, theatre, visual art, language, and discussion.

"For us this was important firstly to maintain engagement with our audiences, but also to sustain the cultural ecosystem that surrounds the festival by supporting the many freelance artists, performers and producers who otherwise would have lost significant earnings." explains Nisha Tandon who founded ArtsEkta in 2006. "Normally we have blend of international and local artists, however this year we have really put the focus on showcasing local talent right here in Northern Ireland to both reinforce to audiences the huge amount of diversity that exists here already, and financially support the local creative sector as much as possible."

[www.belfastmela.org.uk](http://www.belfastmela.org.uk) / [www.artsekta.org.uk](http://www.artsekta.org.uk)

Whilst some kinds of organisations' structures and relationships were almost tailor-made for a crisis like COVID-19, other organisations will take on a more significant civic role in the long-term recovery. Moreover, it is important to note that uncertainty about the future for some organisations has been reflected in inertia or a myopic focus on organisational survival. The ability to adapt has varied not least due to organisational size and scale, funding models, governance priorities and external relationships. Our analysis has identified a number of common 'enabling factors' across the diversity of responses:

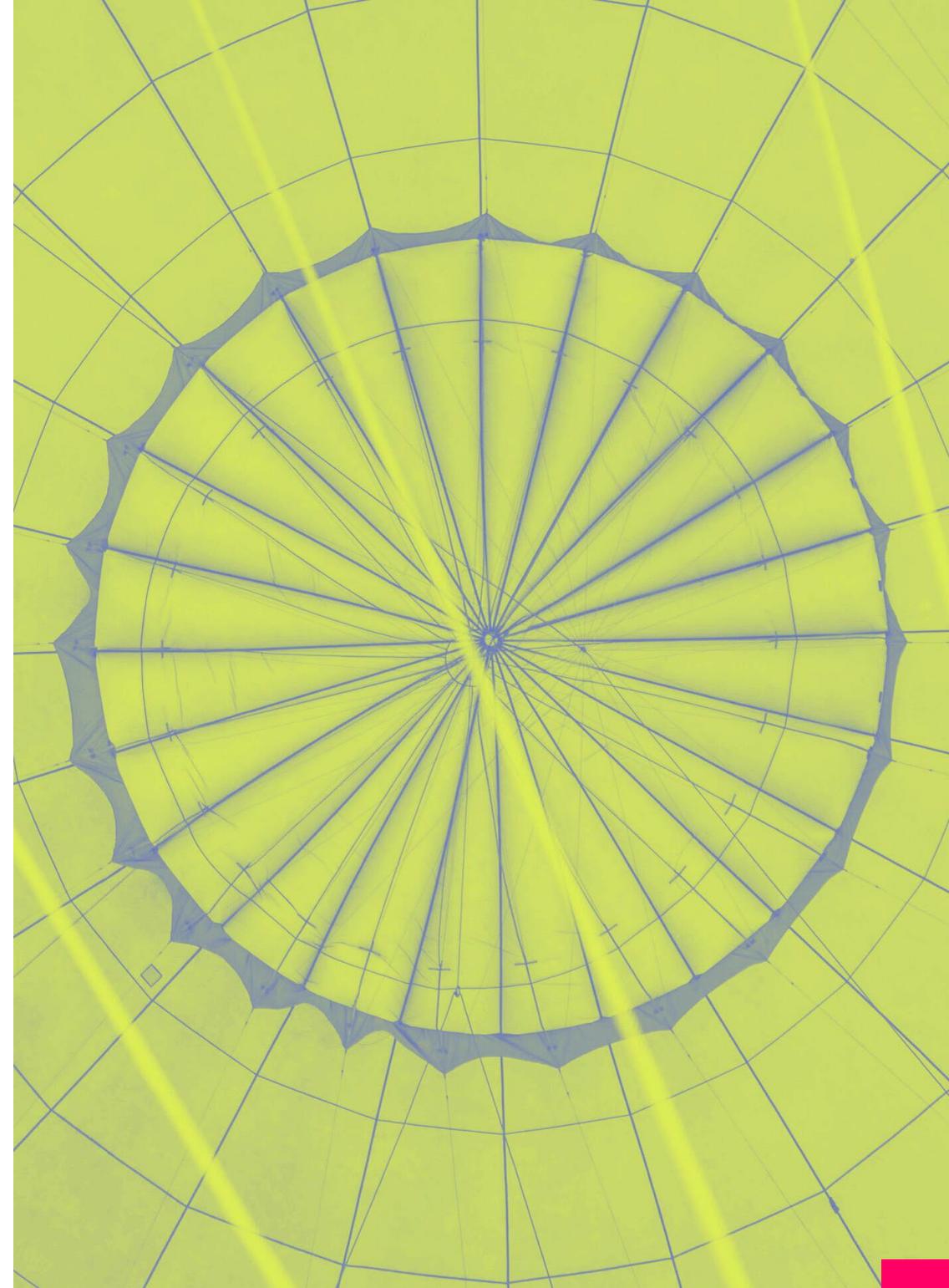
- **STRONG MISSION AND GUIDING VALUES** – Having strong but simple values and principles enabled organisations to be flexible and responsive in these times of heightened uncertainty and rapid change. Values-led organisations, those who already put social and community impact at the heart of their mission, found themselves better equipped to adapt to the crisis. In some cases this translated in practice to agile governance models and representative workforces which were able to understand the needs of communities, for others this resulted in working with a relatively small and targeted group of people. At times, this new way of working has been successful in addressing pre-existing **diversity and inclusion** challenges, enabling outreach to new audiences. But there are also concerns around lack of digital access exacerbating inequalities of cultural experience.
- **CONNECTIVITY WITH OTHER SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE** – Organisations who were able to adapt most successfully saw their creative work as part of wider social, cultural, and civic infrastructure within communities. Those which had strong community roots and trusted local networks were able to provide agile place-based actions. Others have seen the crisis as an opportunity to extend their social impact beyond their local area by focusing on specific social causes or needs. Either way, they were able to mobilise their resources and relationships to provide human-centred responses to the crisis.
- **SUPPORT FROM THE CULTURAL ECOSYSTEM** – An individual organisation's adaptive response was shaped by the sector support it received. Organisations with flexible funders have been able to pivot and respond to emerging community needs in an agile way. Professional networks between cultural organisations have flourished during the pandemic and the training, development, and resource sharing opportunities they provide were repeatedly cited by research participants. The extent to which organisations prioritise cultural

stewardship – their role in supporting their workforce, artistic communities and wider creative talent – has varied, many individual creatives and freelancers experiencing a sense of disconnect with arts organisations and cultural institutions. Where organisations, funders, and sector bodies have invested in cultural stewardship during the crisis, there is solid groundwork for these relationships to continue in the long term.

- **AGILE RESILIENCE** – The crisis has impacted models of financial risk and resilience. Some financial models that previously seemed least risky (such as earned income) have been undermined, whereas others (such as having reserves) have paid off so far. Organisations who were most able to support their communities in the initial stages of the pandemic tended to benefit from stable core income (for example NPO funding) or be less reliant on earned income for other reasons. Low fixed costs and some, but not excessive, financial reserves were also beneficial – both very small unfunded organisations and large institutions often lacked the capacity to adapt quickly. Organisations reliant on either solely project funding have also been limited in how they have been able to respond. Buildings were both assets and liabilities, often presenting immediate operational pressures and limiting the capacity to adjust the business model, while in other cases some spaces have adapted to provide services such as food shops.

While immediate responses to the pandemic have varied, there are clear examples in practice which demonstrate the powerful and privileged role that many arts organisations hold as wider place-shapers and connecting hubs, able to draw on hard and soft assets to respond to social need and lead active, imaginative, and relationship-focused responses to the crisis. In this way, arts organisations make up a pivotal part of a community's social infrastructure.

A number of varying internal and external factors has meant that some organisations, even with the best intentions, have been less able to adapt immediately to the crisis and its effect on communities. Many may still be in the planning stages of their response and will likely take on a more significant civic role in the longer-term. The next chapter looks at how these transitions can be supported by a joined-up response across cultural ecosystems.



# 3.

## Building new pathways for the recovery

The previous chapter highlighted the variation in how different types of arts organisations have been affected by, and responded to, the pandemic. These asymmetries in assets, networks, missions, and business models will continue to be important when thinking about the future, but there are a number of themes we identified which can underpin resilience across local arts ecosystems and the sector as a whole.

"The opportunities are greater now than they have been before. The civic role that the arts and cultural sector can play will continue to be important, if not more so. Yes, things have changed a lot, but the same community issues and needs remain: health and wellbeing, education, economic prosperity and local aspiration. The arts are there to make an impact on people's mental health and shape how they recover, re-find their confidence, and get back into society."  
— Fiona Wallace, Executive Director, New Vic Theatre

"COVID-19 has torn apart the art world and yet, at the same time, it has created some important silver linings which we must grasp, understand, and capitalise on before they are forgotten: The way arts and creativity are reaching more people in more need; unprecedented demand for the arts from the social and health sectors; new collaborations between the arts & health, arts & criminal justice and arts & homelessness sectors... venues reacting and adapting to the primary needs of their communities, and the vital role of countless arts activists who will always be there when society needs them most." — Matt Peacock, Director, With One Voice<sup>3</sup>

Organisations of all scales, sizes and types have a potentially valuable civic role to play in the recovery, and our research has underscored the interdependence between them. Many of the needs and priorities that arts organisations were responding to before the COVID-19 outbreak remain and have been made even more acute. It can be hard for individuals and organisations to start thinking strategically about stabilisation, recovery and rebuilding when faced with ongoing uncertainty around social distancing, venue restrictions, the future funding landscape and the wider economy.

"I'm concerned about the people that want to go back to normal; effectively steering the change to where things were before. A lot of creativity and a lot of learning has come out of this which needs to be taken on board. My view is that collaboration is key; bringing different people together, from cultural and business leaders to communities, to look at what the learning is, and then enabling them to act on it!" — Tracey Sage, SageCulture Consulting and member of the London Cultural Forum Advisory Board

"The civic role of the arts is really central to Stoke. For creatives working in the city it seems to be the default position; it is where we start from: our narratives, who we are, and our sense of place. I could confidently speak for at least ten organisations in Stoke who would all say that their work is completely about the city narrative, city thinking, the development of the city, and its people." — Susan Clarke, Artistic Director, B arts

On the other hand, there are a number of opportunities to 'lock in' the skills, relationships, and learnings developed from the initial stages of the pandemic, and share these lessons across cultural organisations as they plan for recovery in the short to medium-term.

## Adapting the business to the 'new normal'

Smaller and larger cultural organisations have adapted to the pandemic at different paces. Whilst many small organisations with agile governance structures, small staff teams and flexible spaces were able to pivot their activities to serve their community in the early months of lockdown, most larger organisations took longer to adapt. Big organisations tended to have high fixed costs and business models that relied heavily on earned income and ticket sales, meaning that many responded in the initial stages of the pandemic by furloughing their staff, freezing activities, and focusing their remaining capacity on fundraising and lobbying. As social distancing restrictions ease, emergency grants are received, and staff come back from furlough, larger organisations are now putting their strategies to work and reconnecting with their communities and partners.

Practically, preparing to reopen buildings or recommence face-to-face activities safely and sustainably is an immediate priority for most organisations. The ability to reopen varies greatly across different kinds

### BARRIERS TO CIVIC ADAPTATION

The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation's flagship report from the Civic Role of the Arts Inquiry, *Rethinking Relationships*, set out eight barriers to change which continue to be relevant. The COVID-19 crisis has further underscored the importance of support for organisations to tackle these challenges.



#### LEADERSHIP

Leaders can be overstretched and under-supported to focus on civic outcomes.



#### PEOPLE AND SKILLS

Producers, curators and artists may need training and support to interact meaningfully with communities.



#### PARTNERSHIP WORKING

Many organisations aspire to work more closely with community organisations but are not yet doing so.



#### FUNDING

Conventional arts funding and evaluation processes may not fit with community approaches.



#### GROWTH AND REPLICATION

Organisations may worry about weakening community roots or artistic quality if they grow, scale or replicate their activities.



#### BUSINESS MODELS

Embracing a civic role may disrupt existing business models but can also open doors to new funding opportunities.



#### DIVERSITY

Ensuring that participants, staff and definitions of 'the arts' are representative of community demographics can be a challenge.

of organisations and disciplines, for example whilst many galleries can now reopen, theatres and music venues face continuing uncertainty and expect ongoing reduced audience capacity. Those who focus on large events may not get back to normal capacity for another 12 to 18 months, or longer. These limitations impact not only on the audience experience but the business models and finances of many organisations.

“Culture is both a liberating thing and a chain with a ball on it. And the danger is those that have buildings of their own have in a sense hammered their own chains, and are now having to drag this heavy thing around, whereas previously the audience were there to lift it with them. Without the audience it falls to the floor.”  
— Robin Hutchinson, Director, Community Brain

#### LEFTCOAST: EXPERIMENTAL APPROACHES TO REBUILDING COMMUNITY CULTURAL CONFIDENCE

LeftCoast is a grassroots arts organisation based in Art B&B, Blackpool. They are partially funded by Art Council England’s Creative People and Places scheme. Because of their deep roots within Blackpool’s communities they have been well-placed to respond to the practical and creative needs of people in their community during COVID-19: from setting up phone line where families could call-in for a daily story, to coordinating a ‘scrub hub’, attracting over two hundred and twelve local volunteer sewers to make scrubs for NHS staff.

The combination of strong community links, new professional networks formed in response to COVID-19, and the extra time and space for thinking and experimentation has meant that LeftCoast have been able to take new approaches in their practice. To adapt their October light festival, they are testing a way of attaching the projectors to bikes so as to avoid crowds, “so that art moves and you don’t have to move the people”, explains Director Tina Redford.

They are also experimenting with virtual reality headsets to enable people to have safe but immersive and collective experiences together. “People want to get out but they want to get out to a space that feels equally safe as at home, it’s really important that what we do feels controlled for people”, says Tina. Much of their current energy is going into capital fundraising for the tools that will enable them to operate innovatively, for example buying VR headsets or repurposing their ‘Save our Stores’ van with its Tannoy speaker system. As Tina says, “To make change requires ongoing investment.”

[www.leftcoast.org.uk](http://www.leftcoast.org.uk)

“Eden Court is a huge building and has running costs of c. £250,000 per month. We’re not going to earn that income from the shop or café. We need advanced ticket sales income. So I feel very anxious about that. I fear that the longer we’re closed, the more anaesthetised people will become to not coming and the longer it will take to get our audience back.”  
— James Mackenzie Blackman, Chief Executive, Eden Court

“Commercial theatre survives better in cities because there is a groundswell of enough people to buy tickets. We can’t run like that in rural communities because there isn’t that density. Without a subsidy you’re not creating a cultural offer for isolated people; the subsidy overcomes their isolation. My big concern is having a policy which recognises everyone’s long-term needs. I’m not worried about November [2020], I’m worried about April [2021].” — Sue Robinson, Director, Spot On Lancashire

Both practical and financial support is needed. Practically local authorities can support arts organisations to reopen by providing resources and guidance on hygiene, health and safety, as well as local policy roadmaps. Some activities, particularly those with large closely gathered audiences like festivals and carnivals, simply won’t be able to go ahead as they would have otherwise. For organisations which rely heavily on earned income and high-capacity events, such as regional theatres, recommencing activities safely but at limited capacity would not be profitable. In these cases, an ‘adapt-or-die’ approach to radically rethinking delivery models may need to be found. Public and charitable funding will need to support and underpin the development work needed for these new models.

## Developing new hybrid digital-physical models of working

Digital models have broken down barriers across the sector and in many cases engaged new audiences with arts and culture. Across our interviews we have found that there are both aspects of online working that organisations would like to take forward into the recovery, and aspects of online working that failed to successfully replace physical person-to-person engagement.

### KEY LEARNINGS FROM DIGITAL MODELS AND METHODS

Providing digital arts experiences have proved successful when the following factors are accounted for:

- Digital activities build on **existing organisational mission and programmatic objectives**, seek to keep alive existing relationships and engage with new people on this basis.
- Consideration is given to the **physical resources** participants can access their own homes. This meant understanding that not everyone has easy access to scissors and glue, and complementing online provision with delivering physical creative packs and materials.
- Using digital channels as open spaces for **discussion and connection**. Rather than simply streaming events and posting activities online, setting up space for conversation and two-way connection through creative activities was more effective in tackling isolation.
- Activities are **accessible** to diverse audiences, and flexible to enable participants to **engage on their own terms**, for instance re-watching videos, allowing time for private reflection before sharing with others, and allowing a range of ways to contribute.
- Using **grassroots tools and a range of techniques**, rather than imposed the use of rigid digital centralised infrastructure onto people. Organisations that thought about the platforms and tools their participants already used, from Facebook to WhatsApp, have been most successful in sustaining engagement online.

Many senior leaders commented that the move to remote working and provision has pushed forward their organisations' digital literacy and catalysed innovation, growing organisational capacity and unlocked the latent skills of their teams. Funders as well as practitioners have described how shifting online has made UK-wide networking, sharing and collaboration much easier, accelerating the formation of strategic coalitions between organisations. Additionally, money saved on transport and other physical operational costs has been reinvested into programmes.

"A lot of organisations don't have the infrastructure in the office but do at home. This means I can communicate more easily now with those organisations because they're at home rather than in their venues and offices with poor digital infrastructure." — Hannah Mason, Prosper North Senior Project Manager, Creative United

As noted in the previous chapter, some organisations were keenly aware that they have lost touch with some of their community members during lockdown due to digital exclusion or more general ambivalence. There are no immediate hard-and-fast rules about who was excluded by the shift online - however digital exclusion is more likely to affect those with low incomes and those who live rurally. On the other hand, some digital activities have served to break down some barriers, for example, The NewBridge Project's online residencies attracted 89% more applicants with disabilities.

Embedding a hybrid model of working has the potential to increase participation in the arts and strength intra-sector partnerships. To realise the potential of this blended model, organisations could learn from principles of what works best in each: the deep personal relationships and shared live experience of offline working, along with the networked infrastructure, participant-centred experience, and accessibility of online working. There is a potential to harness learnings from other sectors, not least the education sector, to embed best practice and establish shared delivery tools and frameworks for evaluating increased impact.

"Going online is not the future of arts and culture. It has been a very useful exercise seeing what's possible in the digital world, but what people are craving is the non-digital, a return to something offline. I cannot imagine our culture will remain confined to the digital. Live art is an unforgettable experience that cannot be replaced by something else, this is what's special about the arts and culture."  
— Mary-Alice Stack, CEO, Creative United

"One thing that's been made massively clear to us over the past few months is both the opportunities created by online activities for inclusive engagement, but also the limitations of accessibility online. This has made us look harder about the barriers we are creating through online content, but also through our 'in-real-life' programme, and how we can remove these. We want to use our programme when we come back to explore these issues in a public way, and how all of these ideas around sustainability, care, solidarity and diversity aren't happening behind closed doors." — Rebecca Huggan, Director, The NewBridge Project

“Perhaps the lessons from using digital experiences and digital networks can change the systemic problem that if you aren’t in a certain place you cannot consume the same art as those who are there... We can learn from the digital without taking our laptops with us.”

— Akil Scafe-Smith, Co-Founder, RESOLVE

## Rethinking relationships with people and communities

Many of the stories and case studies in this report demonstrate that arts and culture organisations with strong community connections and/or local roots have been able to adapt and be agile to changing social and economic circumstances. Others have developed new relationships and partnerships as a result of their recent activities. In lockdown many new people engaged with culture and potential perceptions that *“it’s not for people like me”* were lifted by the anonymity of online and remote activities.

Leveraging these connections in future can be a key gain from recent events but it would be a mistake to think that it will happen automatically. Doing so well will require a shift in both language and mindset - falling back upon language like ‘audiences’ returns to models of passive spectatorship and creates a false divide between ‘makers’ and ‘consumers’ of culture. Embracing community members’ role as active co-creators, makers, members, and participants also means new forms of communication, talking to them about their assets and priorities, and asking what they want the arts to look like. Volunteers, patrons and participants who have stuck with organisations through the pandemic may expect their loyalty to be recognised. Keeping up open conversations, and opportunities for engagement is important to sustain existing relationships.

“The community store has just attracted a whole heap of people I would never get in this building before. We’ve managed to take down some of the barriers of perception to who we are and what we do. It’s given us a new opportunity to describe what we do in a completely different language, which has attracted a completely different audience.”

— Gavin Stride, Director, Farnham Maltings

### **THE MIGHTY CREATIVES: WORKING WITH SCHOOLS AND CARE SERVICES TO DEVELOP THE YOUTH CULTURAL LIFE FUND**

The Mighty Creatives (TMC) is the Arts Council England regional bridge organisation for the East Midlands. As a children and young people’s charity, TMC offers a broad range of creative programmes from careers support to leadership training and local placemaking. At the outset of the pandemic TMC focused on engaging the arts and cultural organisations they support so that they could remodel their programme and schemes to fit the cultural and education sectors’ needs and priorities.

Out of these conversations, TMC decided to work with local partners, including schools and social care services, to develop the Cultural Life Fund for organisations who provide creative activities to young people, as well as giving bursaries directly to young creatives through the Youth Cultural Life Fund. Alongside financial assistance, the Fund gives organisations and artists access to mentoring and support from TMC staff members. Organisations they consulted expressed a particular need to be supported through the transition online and TMC have been boosting organisations’ and individuals’ digital capacity through training and bursaries. Additionally, they have been working closely with Derbyshire Virtual School and The Amber Factory to provide creative mentoring and holistic support for children in the care system through lockdown.

[www.themightycreatives.com](http://www.themightycreatives.com)

### **FUN PALACES: DEVOLVING COMMUNITY CREATIVITY**

Fun Palaces supports local people to share skills and co-create their own cultural events around the UK and beyond. Before the pandemic Fun Palaces had already established a unique approach to audiences and culture - supporting people to do what they want to do, rather than delivering specific interventions.

The current context has prompted the team to further devolve how Fun Palaces work. *1000 Tiny Fun Palaces* will launch in October, aiming to involve Makers who might have wanted to host a Fun Palace before but didn’t have a venue or the confidence to do it. “What 1000 Tiny Fun Palaces gives us the opportunity to say, is your scrappy project that you thought wasn’t good enough, is perfect for us”, says Stella Duffy, Co-Director. They particularly want to involve people who are shielding to lead Fun Palaces from their homes - in person, online, or at their window. Many of their Makers have poor internet access so they are designing the campaign to enable hybrid digital-physical engagement. By further devolving and increasing the hyper-locality of Fun Palaces for COVID-19, and encouraging large venues and organisations to scale down, they want to push forward a new idea of embracing messiness to create an excellence of engagement.

[www.funpalaces.co.uk/1000-tiny](http://www.funpalaces.co.uk/1000-tiny)

“Where we have seen success is where people have consumed culture as an antidote to lockdown and isolation. What I think we need to do is [continue to] empower those people who don’t identify strongly within the cultural infrastructure; we might consider them ‘hard to reach’ but they HAVE been reached.” — Mary-Alice Stack, CEO, Creative United

### THE MIDI MUSIC COMPANY: SUSTAINING PATHWAYS INTO THE MUSIC INDUSTRY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Based in the London Borough of Lewisham, The Midi Music Company provides a space for all children and young people to be inspired and get into music and the creative industries. By shifting their training work online MMC have managed to keep connected with the young musicians they support through the pandemic. A key part of this work has been keeping career pathways into the creative industries for young people open. Through partnerships with IVOR Music Academy and Red Bull they've connected their participants with producers, commissions and emergency funding and provided mentoring that enables young people to think about how to monetise and package their work for the future, whilst using lockdown as an opportunity to write and create.

Beyond keeping their participants connected and creative, MMC have used this time to rethink their strategic goals. In particular, they've been focusing on embedding environmental sustainability into their work, and a racial justice framework into their relationships with both young people and the wider music industry. As Founder Wozzy Brewster says, "Our civic duty is to recognise the creatives in our community who don't have the kind of support they need. If MMC doesn't survive, where are the seeds and talent pathways going to come from?"

[www.themidimusiccompany.co.uk](http://www.themidimusiccompany.co.uk)

In the months to come many people will continue to be socially or economically vulnerable, isolated and grieving. This will affect not only 'consumer confidence' but also social confidence. There may be a reluctance to travel far and go to busy places. Organisations will need to take their duty of care towards the people they engage with seriously, providing safe cultural experiences and tailored support. At the same time the crisis has deepened many peoples' appreciation of their hyper-local communities and neighbourhoods. When returning to in-person activities, organisations should be prepared to keep things local and focus on building community resilience and confidence from the doorstep out.

"When nothing else was there for our community, we were. It's not enough to just be relevant - you have to also care. In order to really respond and make a difference to people's lives, you must give. That term 'relevance' is too woolly; you can always find a way to talk about how you are being relevant. But you can't always truly say that you're giving and that you're caring through the work that you do."

— Kim Wide, Director, Take A Part

"In the current circumstances, looking at how we support our local communities in the medium term seems much more relevant than touring the country." — Jo Towler, Executive Director, Music in the Round

Arts organisations could learn from asset-based approaches and community organising techniques to develop the way they think about nurturing, systematising and mobilising relationships. Organised, trusting and mutually supportive relationships with communities are both a powerful source of advocacy for the value of culture in peoples' lives, and the basis of a resilient organisation.

## Regenerating local ecologies of culture

A renewed appreciation of local place has key implications for how arts organisations will work in those places. Rather than thinking of a culture in a place as a collection of institutions, arts organisations and individual artists alike are increasingly recognising that they sit within an '**ecology of culture**' and by pooling knowledge, resources and funding, organisations - whether public, commercial or amateur - will have the opportunity to strengthen their collective value and resilience.

"An ecological approach concentrates on relationships and patterns within the overall system, showing how careers develop, ideas transfer, money flows, and product and content move, to and fro, around and between the funded, homemade and commercial subsectors. Culture is an organism not a mechanism; it is much messier and more dynamic than linear models allow." — The Ecology of Culture (2015)<sup>4</sup>

Within a local ecology of culture, organisations of different scales and types are closely interdependent. Many of our research participants from smaller organisations drew attention to current imbalances of power; there was a general sense that large institutions with more money, staff and resources could be more conscious of the power they occupy, and take steps to give some of this power away. Whilst there was keen recognition of the acute financial stress many institutions are under, there was a strong sense that larger organisations could have done more to support communities in the initial stages of the pandemic. For their part, larger organisations we spoke to acknowledged their limited ability or suitability to act in the short term, but were instead focusing on stabilising themselves so that they could better support the recovery of their communities in the longer-term. The steps larger organisations take to becoming more porous and exercise their cultural

stewardship role will be crucial in years to come. Sharing funding, space and increased transparency could boost trust between artists, communities and arts organisations, and derive shared value for all involved.

“There has been a gap between where grassroots organisations develop the love and interest in the arts and the larger organisations reap the benefits without acknowledging the chain. But this lockdown has made that chain much more visible.” — Hannah Mason, Prosper North Senior Project Manager, Creative United

“The professional and amateur sectors have been perceived as separate for far too long. There are 63,000 amateur groups in the UK which a sixth of the population take part in. By their scale they exist and thrive in everywhere and in every type of community. Amateur groups see themselves as absolutely part of the wider art sector; they are a vital part of the arts ecosystem. There is an important and unexplained trickle down from publicly funded arts to the amateur sector. Public funding for professional arts organisations doesn’t just benefit that company and its direct audience, but the whole ecosystem, including amateur groups.” — Robin Simpson, Chief Executive, Voluntary Arts

Our research underscored the need for arts organisations to actively support freelancers, who make up 47% of the cultural sector’s workforce<sup>5</sup> (and 70% of the theatre and performance industry’s workforce)<sup>6</sup> and who play a crucial role in the ecology, netting together siloed organisations through project work and cross-pollinating ideas. In the months to come many freelancers, particularly those who used to earn income through touring, will be looking to redirect their energy, talent and expertise locally.

“I’ve started thinking about how my practice can be relocated within walking distance from my house, if I can’t get to the big venues then how can I use the local community centre... Right now there’s a lot of energy bubbling away amongst freelancers who would love to help organisations respond to the crisis and reimagine their civic role, but we have nowhere to put that energy. It’s hard to know how to help when buildings and organisations don’t have the capacity or budget to work with us.” — Bethany Wells, Independent performance designer

“Artists can help organisations imagine a different future and a different model of leadership. Times of crisis call for big solutions and it’s important to make sure that those who fill the buildings our tax money goes to are not just left with the breadcrumbs trickling down from larger organisation’s rescue packages.” — Omar Elerian, Independent theatre director

There are a number of recent success stories to draw on from local commissioning programmes which provide opportunities and new links for local artists. Over the longer-term, more fundamental thinking around operational and governance models may also be necessary to meaningfully harness diverse sources of talent.

#### LOCAL ART COMMISSIONING IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Many arts organisations have used micro-commissions to engage artists in specific COVID-19 response projects. Commissions have drawn on local creativity to tell stories, inspire communities and promote wellbeing. Through commissioning artists, organisations have harnessed their civic role as place-shapers and using art to enhance people’s experiences of shared online and offline spaces, as well as promoting peoples’ emotional sense of place and local identity. Examples include:

**SEED** (Sedgemoor, Somerset), in collaboration with Arts Council England and Creative People and Places, has commissioned five local artists/groups to deliver creative activities to engage, support and creatively connect people in Sedgemoor during the COVID-19 lockdown [www.seedsedgemoor.com](http://www.seedsedgemoor.com)

**THE CULTURAL SPRING** is an award-winning arts and culture project which has commissioned five local artists to explore new ways of connecting people and communities with arts and culture during the COVID-19 pandemic. [www.theculturalspring.org.uk/news/new-commissions-for-artists-help-us-in-staying-connected](http://www.theculturalspring.org.uk/news/new-commissions-for-artists-help-us-in-staying-connected)

**GREATER MANCHESTER’S COVID-19 CULTURAL ARCHIVE** has commissioned sixty local creatives to create work that documents the impact of the pandemic. [www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/news/final-call-for-applications-for-500-covid-19-creative-commissions](http://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/news/final-call-for-applications-for-500-covid-19-creative-commissions)

**EAST DURHAM CREATES** has led a major art commission engaging young people aged 13-25 via a digital response alongside a large scale mural in Seaham. [www.eastdurhamcreates.co.uk](http://www.eastdurhamcreates.co.uk)

**HEART OF GLASS** has created ten commissions for artists to create work in their homes based on the theme of ‘care’. [www.heartofglass.org.uk](http://www.heartofglass.org.uk)

### MAIA: BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE CULTURAL ECOSYSTEMS THROUGH SOLIDARITY

MAIA is an artist-led cultural organisation based in Birmingham. Through building infrastructure, relationships, and platforms for artists, they exist to level the cultural playing field across the West Midlands. When the pandemic hit, MAIA set up the West Midlands Artists Coronavirus Emergency Fund, crowdfunding £10,285 over two months. They distributed over fifty £200 grants for artists and cultural workers who fell through the gaps in government support on a first-come-first-served, condition-free basis.

Alongside the emergency support, they opened up artist bursaries and themed commissions, as well as running roundtables, workshops and talks through lockdown, sustaining the social infrastructure of the local artistic communities. This investment and networking during lockdown underpins MAIA's commitment to creating the conditions for artists, creatives and communities who have long been marginalised to thrive. MAIA have now launched The Freedom Fund - a no criteria grant for Black Artists in the West Midlands to use in whatever way they feel is necessary to them.

[www.maiagroup.co](http://www.maiagroup.co)

### SHETLAND ARTS: SUSTAINING FRAGILE CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE THROUGH LOCKDOWN

Shetland Arts runs a theatre, gallery, multi arts venue and year-round programme of cultural activities and festivals across Shetland. It exists to promote and develop the enjoyment and practice of arts by all, and to make Shetland a better place to live. As a result of the pandemic they lost over 70% of their projected income, furloughed all but seven of their 100 staff, and cancelled their three main festivals to free up resources. Yet at the same time they launched 'Shetland Unlocked' a free, community-driven public festival that will be held four to six weeks after lockdown is fully lifted.

This festival has acted as the linchpin of their efforts to continue to support Shetland's local creatives through lockdown. As the only regularly publicly funded arts organisation across the islands it has a crucial role to play within the local cultural ecology. They kept running education courses and wellbeing activities in the lead-up to the festival through lockdown so that they could pay their network of artists and freelancers. This entailed a significant restructure of their business model and engagement work to keep money flowing into local communities. Nevertheless, the ongoing challenges of the pandemic mean they will be reopening with shorter hours and a reduced offering. Shetland Arts are redesigning their programmes to protect the organisations' sustainability so it can continue to support the islands' cultural life and deliver on its core community-focused mission.

[www.shetlandarts.org](http://www.shetlandarts.org)

"Through COVID-19 localism has become a really persuasive idea. Many regional arts organisations are fighting a centralism within their town centres and also a national centralism towards London. By disrupting an arterial model of culture - where everyone draws themselves to urban centres for arts - we can build a world in which culture transects through life everywhere." — Akil Scafe-Smith, Co-Founder, RESOLVE

## Continuing collaboration beyond the arts

As the previous chapter highlighted, many of the most successful collaborations in response to the pandemic have reached beyond the cultural sector. Arts organisations have worked with community groups, health commissioners, housing providers and more to ensure people continued to live full cultural lives during lockdown. Many started doing work that might on the surface not seem cultural, for example delivering food. How organisations capitalises this work moving forward will be important to how the sector as a whole reinforces its public value in the COVID-19 recovery.

"The needs which arts organisations have been responding to in lockdown already existed prior to COVID-19. Many communities have faced the brunt of what Dhelia Snoussi terms 'institutional indifference' from both cultural institutions and councils for a long time. There is an opportunity to learn from and value the community organisations who were there before, and rather than replicating their work, form meaningful partnerships with them in a way that balances who does and doesn't have power in these exchanges."

— Zain Dada, Programme Manager, Maslaha

Arts organisations have a unique chance to make the case for the value of creative expertise beyond the cultural sector. These partnerships have the potential to develop beyond community and social care, to technology, sustainability, science, industry and more, making the case for the value of cultural connections within each sector. Cross-sector partnerships are therefore a powerful way that local arts ecosystems can build both resilience and social purpose through the recovery - as well as unlocking diversified sources of funding. There is a particular opportunity to embed these cross-sector partnerships at a regional, city and local level.

### BRITTEN PEARS ARTS: STRENGTHENING PARTNERSHIPS WITH COMMUNITY KEYHOLDERS

Britten Pears Arts, the Suffolk-based music and heritage charity, was recently formed by the merger of Snape Maltings with the Britten Pears Foundation. The pandemic brought huge challenges with the cancellation of the Aldeburgh Festival and the Snape Proms and the curtailing of many other activities as well as the closure of the retail shops which had been providing much needed income. Nevertheless, the charity has aimed to keep their local community connected through online and physical support. When they reopen, Britten Pears aim to double-down on their local, cross-sector partnerships and find a new balance between the local, national and international in their programmes.

Recent events have highlighted the need for increased partnership working and strong relationships with the “keyholders” to community relationships. By advocating for the value that arts can add to peoples’ lives, they hope to build more integrated, supportive local communities with partners. As a result of this intensified focus on community wellbeing, the organisation intends to refocus its efforts on those who have experienced vulnerability through the pandemic. These people who are shielding are unlikely to be able to return to Britten Pears’ for some time, so they want to bring creativity to them in their local communities instead. By building strong community partnerships with health and social care organisations, as well as accessing localised data they hope to understand the hyper-local impact of COVID-19 and shape their programme and access arrangements accordingly.

[www.brittenpearsarts.org](http://www.brittenpearsarts.org)

“Sheffield’s Cultural Consortium have been working to engage the Local Enterprise Partnership and city business leaders to raise the awareness of culture in terms of its value and impact to a region and city. Since COVID-19 hit, those doors are starting to open. People are listening and inviting us into conversations now. They are wanting culture in a way that I wasn’t hearing before.” — **Judith Harry, Executive Director, SITE Gallery**

“If city and regional leaders can see a social and civic value in arts in the same way as they see an economic value, that could be a really meaningful force for local transformation.” — **James Lock, Managing Director, Opus**

### THE AUXILIARY: ROOTED APPROACHES TO DEVELOPING A CULTURAL ECOLOGY BEYOND THE ARTS

The Auxiliary is a gallery and studio space based in Middlesbrough. Their programme includes cross-disciplinary festivals like the Middlesbrough Art Weekender. Partly through the partnerships made through the Weekender, as well as The Cultural Partnership - an independent, member-run group administrated by Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art and the Council - the Auxiliary have felt well-supported through recent events by their local cultural ecosystem. The well-networked cultural scene within the Tees Valley meant they were able to mutually support arts organisations in the area and raise £12,000 to give to local artists as emergency grants.

Alongside sustaining their cultural connections, the pandemic has prompted The Auxiliary to pivot their attention to serving their wider local community. Before their exhibition programme was primarily aimed at other artists, but their remote work through COVID-19 has given a chance to change this and reach a wider community. Through their *ABODE Every Home is a Gallery* programme they partnered with freelance artists, funder Thirteen Housing Group and refugee charity Open Door North East, to run creative photography and printing courses through packs delivered to 100 local residents’ homes.

The success of this project and value of the connections beyond the arts has significantly changed how The Auxiliary are planning for the future. They want to bring more people into The Auxiliary’s decision-making structures by turning the space into a co-op, empowering local artists as well as small arts organisations to run the Auxiliary’s exhibition and public programme. The founding team behind The Auxiliary are working with the Council to explore transferring empty homes in Gresham into a new community-led social housing project, with plans to embed the connections made as a result of the COVID-19 context and root art and culture within the area’s daily life.

[www.theauxiliary.co.uk](http://www.theauxiliary.co.uk)

### BEATFREES: UNLEASHING YOUNG PEOPLE’S CREATIVITY AND POWER THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS

Beatfrees are an engagement agency and community of young creatives based in Birmingham. They aim to give power to young people by building networks, supporting creative development, and connecting them with paid opportunities to influence how brands and governments work. Alongside core charitable funding, part of Beatfrees income is earned through paid partnerships with businesses. Because of this dual income model they’ve been financially resilient through COVID-19, picking up new clients as companies and governments tried to understand young peoples’ experience of the pandemic. Examples of these programmes include the *Be Internet Citizens programme*, supported by Google.org, that aims to help teenagers use the internet safely. They’ve also teamed up with cosmetics company Lush to host self-care tutorials on Beatfrees’ Instagram live, and magazine *gal-dem* to run virtual careers in journalism workshops. The impetus of COVID-19, as well as the way it has broken down geographic boundaries has helped solidify these partnerships.

[www.beatfrees.com](http://www.beatfrees.com)

The scale of the pandemic demands joined up responses that harness relationships and cultivate the web of culture that sustains and enriches each citizen's social, creative, and civic life. However, the potential for continued adaptation, innovation and collaboration as described above may only be successful if implemented alongside wider structural support in the short to medium-term. From our interviews and focus groups we found particular demand for:

- **NEW APPROACHES TO LEADERSHIP** need to be enabled and supported. Many leaders of arts organisations have been isolated, under-capacity due to furloughed staff, and unable to exchange ideas unless they have access to strong local or sector-wide networks. Yet at the same time, it has also been an opportunity for leaders to analyse the purpose of their work and reappraise their organisation's social impact. The resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in the US and UK has prompted significant internal reflection into how many organisations are run and the extent to which they are inclusive of their communities. It is clear that the decisions which cultural leaders are making now will have long-term implications on the culture of the organisation and its activities for years to come. Interviewees commented that they want to embed radical changes in how their organisation works but have limited capacity to do so whilst under acute operational and financial pressure. Support could include tailored guidance on how to support and meaningfully connect with their specific communities and build sustainable, collaborative relationships with community leaders; training and coaching to translate commitments to diversity and equality into practice; and individual support for personal resilience and wellbeing. Crucially, this support needs to reach beyond traditional organisational 'leaders', to think about who has emerged as leaders in the COVID-19 context, and who will be best equipped to lead in the future.

"What's struck me recently is the limitations of larger organisations, we've had to focus on staffing and budgets and capital projects and have generally been much more inward looking...Thinking about the leadership that has been shown in civil society at the community level – how does that influence or almost take over a legacy organisation like ours?"

— Tony Butler, Executive Director, Derby Museums

"In some places we've seen brilliant cultural activity happening during this crisis. With dispersed leadership at the heart of each Creative Civic Change project, communities can continue to deliver whilst local arts organisations are on furlough. It will be interesting to see how we can learn from this and create a more resilient sector." — Grace Bremner, Senior Programme Co-ordinator – Creative Civic Change, Local Trust

- **FUNDING MODELS** which help 'bake in' the positive lessons from the COVID-19 context and support local ecosystems to thrive. The Government's £1.57 billion Cultural Recovery Fund rescue package for the arts, culture and heritage industries announced in July 2020 was welcomed by all we spoke to. However, as a short-term funding package, focused on the current financial year, it may not support the bold long-term reimagining work the sector needs. Whilst it is clear that the scheme is intended for established organisations with high fixed costs and significant earned income, there is an opportunity for investment to go beyond propping up old models of cultural institutions. For instance, the Repayable Finance strand is well-placed to invest in laying the foundations for progressive and entrepreneurial approaches to arts and culture. Moreover, public funders, private philanthropists, investors and commissioners could consider how their funding encourages partnership working and consortium bids, enables devolved funding and micro-commissions for artists, and encourages further experimentation and testing of new imaginative delivery models. The impact of new funds like Resourcing Racial Justice, set up specifically to address structural inequalities within grant-making, should be closely watched by funders. There are also expectations that conditions on grants may be used to change organisational behaviour and diversity commitments.

"My main concern is about project-based approaches to arts and community fundraising. That's a huge barrier to real development work. Everybody's time is attached to an outcome. We need more time for people to exist and do, and less stress on delivering to a timeframe, because I don't think that's helpful right now."

— Kim Wide, Director, Take A Part

“Often a lot of arts funding can be quite damaging in local communities where the relationships are very fragile. It can change the balance of awareness, control, power and ambition in an area. It you work outside of funding structures you can act really quickly... that is why Grizedale was able to double its programme as soon as lockdown happened.”

— Adam Sutherland, Director, Grizedale

“It’s reasonable to believe that private and public funders will want to see more interaction with community... There is an opportunity for bringing in new philanthropy with the impact art can make on health, education, etc.”

— Sir Vernon Ellis, Chair, New Philanthropy for the Arts

- **WIDENING ACCESS TO CULTURAL ECOSYSTEMS** will be crucial as it becomes increasingly clear even at the early stages of the recovery that not all organisations will survive. Many staff within the arts sector, particularly front-of-house and low-income staff have already lost their jobs. In June (before the announcement of the Government’s rescue package for the arts), Oxford Economics and the Creative Industries Federation forecasted one in five creative jobs being lost and a revenue drop of £74 billion for the creative industries<sup>7</sup>, whilst a survey conducted in March by Bectu found that 71% of freelancers in the industry will struggle to survive financially as a result of lockdown<sup>8</sup>. Meanwhile, research from the Ubele Initiative, although not specific to the cultural sector, has suggested that BAME-led charities across the voluntary sector are at heightened risk of closure, with nine in ten of those surveyed expecting to close within three months<sup>9</sup>. Public bodies and sector support networks will need to consider their duty of care towards these individuals and organisations who are affected: for organisations models like Stewarding Loss and their Farewell Fund may be relevant<sup>10</sup>, while individuals may need support through training and development opportunities. A bold way to reshape cultural infrastructure so that it supports those most at risk could be to put artists at the heart of redesigning these initiatives.

“People of BAME backgrounds have been hit hard by COVID-19. As a team led by Women of Colour we’ve been reluctant to re-open Rabbits Road Press prematurely as both ourselves and our communities are particularly vulnerable. What local council support is available to organisations like us in the arts?”— Sahra Hersi, Member, Rabbits Road Press

## LESSONS FROM PLACE-BASED FUNDING MODELS

Through our research we found that cultural initiatives with a clear place-based remit and a cross-organisational dispersed leadership were particularly well prepared for COVID-19. This suggests that such funding models, like **Creative Civic Change** or the Art Council’s **Creative People and Places**, build both community and cultural resilience. By pursuing place-based collaborative funding models in the future these gains could be entrenched. Such a programme might consider:

- **OUTCOMES FOR A PLACE** - not a project or organisation: Investing in local people and infrastructure rather than specific project objectives and outcomes.
- **DECISION MAKING BY LOCAL PEOPLE** - Ongoing consultation with local people on what cultural activities they would like to be produced. This sometimes, but not always, involves local residents’ panels or working groups who approve plans or even allocate funds.
- **CO-DESIGN IN THE LOCAL CONTEXT** - It should be noted that communities tend to mobilise around issues, so designing funds around the social and economic issues which local people and partners have identified is more important than abstract place-making objectives.
- **ASSET-BASED AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT APPROACHES** - Focusing on developing and linking the skills and capacity that already exist in an area and population.
- **LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS AND RESOURCES** - Recognising how leveraging other local assets can accelerate and multiply impact.

[www.localtrust.org.uk/other-programmes/creative-civic-change](http://www.localtrust.org.uk/other-programmes/creative-civic-change)  
[www.creativepeopleplaces.org.uk](http://www.creativepeopleplaces.org.uk)

In the short to medium-term, leveraging the new collaborative models and delivery methods that have emerged during the crisis could help the arts and culture sector rebuild itself around relationships and reciprocity, so that it is ‘more than the sum of its parts’. Understanding and unlocking the power of the whole web of relationships that make an arts organisation thrive will be key to a creative, dynamic and equitable recovery. In addition to the interdependencies within cultural ecosystems, arts organisations and individual artists alike are increasingly recognising the crucial role they play within a community’s social infrastructure. Pooling knowledge, resources and funding with other arts and non-arts organisations – whether public, charitable, commercial or voluntary – will strengthen cultural organisations’ collective value and resilience in the COVID-19 recovery.

# Roadmaps to recovery in five cultural ecosystems

Our focus groups with cultural leaders, practitioners and enablers in five places identified specific, place-based trends and opportunities as we look ahead to economic, social and cultural recovery.



# Norwich: Democratising the city's Cultural Compact

Norwich has a strong creative scene of museums, theatre companies, established and new galleries, and cultural festivals. Over recent years the city has benefited from significant Arts Council England investment and the legacy of 2008 and 2013 City of Culture bids has meant there are established links between arts organisations in the city, the local universities, and the Council, reflected in recent advocacy work that has been led by [Norwich Theatre](#).

The City Council is currently planning the launch of the city's Cultural Compact; a redesigned cross-sectoral cultural board for the city which will develop a cultural plan aligned to the Norwich 2040 City Vision. Moving out of lockdown and into a period of stabilisation, arts organisations across Norwich have the chance to harness the strength of new connections and embed them into these plans.

[“Places that can stand together will survive together and the key thing for me is that there needs to be a complete and utter democratisation so there's no hierarchy between different art form ... the true value is in the creative experiences that people want.”](#)  
— [Stephen Crocker, Chief Executive, Norwich Theatre](#)

Whilst many have already demonstrated strong community-based responses to COVID-19, from [Norfolk & Norwich Festival](#) distributing *Let's Create* creative packs, to [Young Norfolk Arts](#) hosting online performances for new musicians, a joined-up and democratised approach to culture across the city could catalyse the impact of this work. The city's new Cultural Compact could respond by:

- Putting residents and communities at the heart of cultural decision making. There is potential for a democratised cultural offer which learns from the examples of citizen-led cultural

commissioning within place-based funding models like Creative People and Places.

- Developing the city's cultural leadership skills and capacity. The [National Centre for Writing's](#) new leadership programme, *Collaboration: Place: Change*, is one such intervention to ensure that new approaches, styles and ways of working that have emerged under lockdown can be embedded in the city. This may involve shifting leadership styles to focus on enabling others and fostering active cultural and creative capacity among citizens. The scheme could also look beyond established leaders to focus on nurturing the natural leaders that have emerged through the crisis.
- Providing high quality opportunities for collaboration and knowledge sharing between organisations, individual artists and freelancers alike. This may include devolved funding commissions for volunteer-led work, younger generations of artists and independent curators – for example plans are already underway at [Norwich and Norfolk Festival](#) to provide microfunds for local organisers and the [Assembly House Trust](#) intend to share space and funding for local arts orgs to run events. By opening up long-running conversations around cultural strategy to new voices and influences, Norwich has the chance to support cultural development from the grassroots up.

# Sheffield: Locking in community relationships into cultural recovery planning

Sheffield's cultural ecosystem is characterised by a strong grassroots network of small organisations, DIY spaces, and cultural projects. These sit comfortably alongside larger venues and institutions like Sheffield Theatres; a strong and proactive consortium of cross-cultural organisations; and a track record of public and private sector collaboration to deliver larger cultural events. Compared to other cities in Yorkshire, Sheffield has fewer large NPOs and the cultural life of the city is already fairly decentralised. Nevertheless, there is untapped potential to celebrate and further strengthen the links that already exist between individual arts organisations and community groups, as well as between the arts, science and technology.

As Sheffield recovers from COVID-19, the city's Cultural Consortium has a key role to play in strengthening the arts' social and physical infrastructure in the city, as well as embedding the role of artists and creative innovation within wider city life. Recent responses to the pandemic have demonstrated a positive coming together of arts and cultural organisations via this support network and others.

"It feels like there's a much more cohesive sector at the moment, than there ever has been in the past. New plans are starting to come forward about how we can work into the future in a more cohesive network."

— Ian Wild, Chief Executive, Showroom Workstation

A number of our focus group participants had refocused their work to focus on hyper-local community needs during the early stages of the pandemic. For instance, **Music in the Round** has forged partnerships with local housing associations to take live music to shielding residents; **Now Then** magazine worked with voluntary organisations to amplify their

crisis response work; **Foodhall** community kitchen redoubled their existing food security work, feeding 12,000 people through lockdown, whilst moving its cultural events online to keep the community connected. Similarly, freelancers who have been limited in their national or touring work have a keen appetite to connect with local arts organisations to support local efforts.

"The emphasis on hyper local coming out of the pandemic has been a really important part of our thinking, and I think that's going to be increasingly important as we carry on."

— Sara Trentham Black, Chair, S1 Artspace

Moving forward Sheffield has the opportunity to embed this focus on the hyperlocal within its ecosystem of grassroots and independent organisations. As an established body with close links to the Council, Sheffield Cultural Consortium is well-placed to build civic principles and social purpose into the cultural recovery strategy, by:

- Building a shared language around the civic and community work which local arts organisations are already doing. Many of the participants are doing impressive work with communities but lack the language to identify this work's value and purpose collectively or define the role of creativity and imagination in the city's community life and social infrastructure.
- Promoting the links between cultural activity and social wellbeing by showcasing existing best practice between arts organisations and charities, voluntary organisations, and mutual aid groups. This includes the ways in which they can use their spaces, resources, and expertise to support community groups.
- Supporting individual artists and freelancers in the city to connect with local arts organisations, and encouraging transparency and accountability from large and small organisations from the arts sector in terms of how they programme and commission work. There is also key potential to enable the wider creative industries and businesses to sustain, nurture, and tap into local artistic talent through the recovery.

# Hull: Dispersed leadership and engaging the artistic community in the City's Cultural Strategy

They key legacy from Hull's time as the City of Culture in 2017 was an embedded approach to working with communities (95% of residents attended at least one cultural activity in 2017) and a vibrant network of over 4000 local volunteers<sup>11</sup>. A number of individual arts and cultural organisations have been able to draw on these strong community foundations and principles of everyday creativity and participation to respond during the COVID-19 crisis. For instance **Middle Child Theatre** created grants, commissioning opportunities and training for young creatives; **Absolutely Cultured** redeployed their Volunteer Programme to assist coordinate the Citywide Covid-19 Emergency Response, offered eight digital artist commissions, and a package of online Trainee Producer Workshops; **Back to Ours** transitioned their The Living Room talking shop into a call service; and independent dancer **Tamar Draper** devised free doorstep dances for families struggling with lockdown.

On the other hand, while some individual organisations have succeeded in being agile and responsive, there are gaps in the City's wider cultural ecosystem in terms of supporting individual freelancers and practitioners. Some of our focus group participants perceived the city's Cultural Strategy, and other sector infrastructure, as too 'top-down' and hard to meaningfully engage with or contribute to as a practitioner.

*"There's a lot, sometimes I'll talk to freelance friends and I'll accidentally drop in something like Cultural Collisions or the Culture and Place Strategic Advisory Group and they don't know what I'm talking about. Rather than more places to go through, we need less and more effective ones."*

— Paul Smith, Artistic Director, Middle Child

Moving forward, Hull has a number of opportunities to breathe fresh life into the cultural ecosystem, reclaim and democratise the legacy of the City of Culture 2017, and build back the buzz and energy that surrounded the city at the time. To capitalise on this moment of renewal, the current cultural leaders need to make space for new voices and empower artists to take an active lead in building the city's future. This requires a Cultural Strategy which:

- Embraces Hull's distinct cultural ecosystem, with a vibrant body of independents, freelancers and creatives. By supporting flexibility, agility and experimentation within the independent sector the Cultural Strategy can enable the cultural ecosystem to fully realise its potential as a socially-resilient hotbed of creative civic innovation.
- Provides support for more dispersed leadership models, thinking strategically about where change happens and what vehicles could deliver this change most quickly and effectively. Beyond sector networks, organisations themselves could take steps to open up their governance and involve independents, freelancers and artists within decision making.
- Ensure smaller pots of funding are distributed more evenly across the ecosystem, to allow space for artists and creatives to have an active role in shaping culture, and room for risky ideas to be tried out. Participants identified that the COVID-19 context gave them a break from the 'hamster wheel' of delivery and this moment of reflection could be harnessed for long-term gain.

# County Durham:

## Supporting local wellbeing through community-based partnerships

Set within a vibrant community-based cultural ecosystem, arts organisations in County Durham have long specialised in embedded place-based creative work that puts communities and audiences at the centre of cultural production. Because there were already well-developed links between community organisations and arts organisations, the cultural ecosystem was well prepared to adapt and respond to the community's changing cultural needs and priorities in lockdown. Due to the poor broadband coverage across the county, and marked digital inequalities, a number of organisations focused their work on reaching people offline: **Jack Drum Arts** were supported by the **3 Towns Area Action Partnership** to deliver arts and crafts activity packs around communities, set up a Doorstep Gigs programme taking live music and storytelling to vulnerable people and families, and in collaboration with **Blackhall Community Centre** put on a day of street theatre performances. **East Durham Creates** distributed Arty Packs through foodbanks, children's services and community centres to reach isolating low-income families. Whilst Big Local Partnership **Gaunless Gateway** have repurposed funds to patch gaps in their community partners' funding, provide data packages to overcome digital barriers, and support creative work in care homes to overcome isolation.

*"It's so different to what we did last year when we were performing to thousands of people. The work is more focused but it is equally, if not more, important. With all these gigs I get quite emotional about them because I know they're having such an impact on people."*

— Helen Ward, Director, Jack Drum Arts

Recently, **Durham County Council** have strategically aligned their cultural services with public health departments to harness the benefits of the arts for community wellbeing. This presents an opportunity for creative organisations around the county to further embed their long-standing wellbeing and civic specialisms within wider regional policy. **Durham Culture Partnership's** revised manifesto and **Durham County Council's** new combined wellbeing and culture strategy has the potential to proactively:

- Celebrate the role of community centres and natural community leaders within the County's cultural 'soft' and 'hard' infrastructure. Many parts of the County lack specialised and purpose-built arts spaces but do have informal cultural and social spaces. These spaces, like **Blackhall Community Centre**, are often already well-used by local communities and are run by trusted community leaders with wide-ranging expertise across wellbeing, creativity, and community development.
- Employ asset-based community development approaches to build on the existing skills, connections, and capabilities within County Durham. Devolved grant-making approaches could give partners the space to experiment with approaches that replicate the kind of small-scale, high quality, and socially-purposeful interventions that have emerged during the lockdown in Durham's local communities. Listening to and including community leaders, grassroots arts organisations, freelancers, and artists within top-level strategy conversations is also vital to embed the connections made through lockdown.
- Advocate for deep personal cultural engagement in the COVID-19 recovery, rather than a return to the 'bums on seats' high-volume engagement model which was already a challenge in isolated rural communities. A organisations and communities recover, recognition of quality above quantity from funders would help rekindle participants' confidence.
- Amplify the value of culture for peoples' wellbeing, beyond rigid social prescribing models. Through recognising the holistic value of culture within a fulfilling life, the Council can build on their successful approach to creativity during the COVID-19 lockdown to avoid evaluating cultural activities against narrow medical outcomes.

# London Borough of Newham: Supporting grassroots cultural infrastructure to thrive through a time of rapid change

Located in East London, the Borough of Newham's population is one of the youngest and most diverse areas in the UK. Even before the pandemic, the creative scene in Newham was at a point of transition: Heavy redevelopment work around Stratford and Canning Town is bringing new, big-name cultural institutions into the borough. Now, with the pause and realignment of values which the COVID-19 context has prompted, [Newham Borough Council](#) and [Greater London Authority](#) leaders have the opportunity to refocus attention on nurturing the borough's leading grassroots culture, and invest in rebuilding the creative infrastructure needed by Newham's youth.

*["Newham is a borough that has traditionally not treated the arts as a priority - in particular artists and smaller arts projects. This is an opportunity for Newham to look at talent in the borough and perhaps appreciate it in a different way, to see the value that artists add to the borough."](#) — Persis Jadé Maravala, Co-founder, ZU-UK*

Newham benefits from having a grassroots arts scene that is highly integrated within the borough's communities, heightening demand for their services throughout lockdown. [Salma Gundi](#) continued to run digital inclusion sessions for elders in partnership with the library service; and [Together! 2012](#) individually phone the 30 disabled artists they regularly support each week to set up a personal weekly creativity programme. At

the same time, the barriers of digital exclusion and poverty, particularly among young people, were acutely felt. For many organisations the experience of the pandemic was inseparable from racial justice and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, as well as disability justice. The working-class and BAME communities in Newham have been acutely affected by deaths from COVID-19.

*["Through the pandemic we've been able to represent disabled people in the borough to the Council. As an arts organisation it's been an amazing turn around. We've been able to use our design expertise, audience connections, and arts data to inform local public health"](#)  
— Ju Gosling, Artistic Director, Together! 2012*

Moving forward, the Council, GLA, and new cultural institutions could support a shared cultural recovery strategy which:

- Invests in rebuilding lost creative infrastructure (resources, facilities, and education) for young people in the borough, building on the work of grassroots organisations like [Rosetta Arts](#) or [Rabbits Road Press](#). This would unlock creative talent and enable Newham's young people to be the next generation of cultural leaders.
- Supports artist-led collaboration between organisations, building a grassroots cultural network across disciplines. At a time when there are fears of new cultural developments crowding-out or putting grassroots initiatives in competition with each other, a trusting and collaborative network that embraces local diversity would be valued.
- Funds creative experimentation towards long-term resilience. Many organisations and individuals are trying to work towards models of greater autonomy and self-sufficiency because of the uncertain future funding context. Devolved decision-making, staggered scoping and implementation grants, streamlined applications, and smaller pots of money for testing initiatives would all benefit Newham's long-term social and cultural resilience.

# 4. Reimagining the future: Scenarios of a (post) COVID world

Our research highlighted a widespread desire to not go back to the 'old normal', but to respond to this time of disruption with a deep social reimagination. In times of deep upheaval and uncertainty it may seem premature to ask what the world may look like in five to ten years' time. But although uncertainty can hinder the ability to be creativity ambitious and think strategically, it also opens up a space of potential where ideas that once seemed impossible are now within reach.

The COVID-19 pandemic is the latest in a series of large global events and experiences, from Brexit to the sharpening awareness of the climate crisis and beyond. Indeed, whilst the health crisis may pass within a couple of years, the economic and social effects will take longer to unfold. The longer-term challenges and opportunities which may emerge in the post-COVID social and economic landscape will profoundly affect the redesign of our institutions, organisations, services and systems. There are inevitable losses coming, both inside the arts sector and wider society, this is also a moment for reflection and renewed purpose in terms of what arts and cultural organisations can do differently and how those changes will lay the foundations for our wider cultural lives.

In these times of rapid structural shifts the arts have a specialised role to play in fuelling and inspiring public storytelling, taking on a '**civic imaginary**' role in local communities and national debate: helping to form the creative and symbolic dimension of our social world, in which we create our relationships with each other, ways of living together, and collective life.

Below we outline a small selection of broad social and economic trends which present formative opportunities for culture to be embedded in emerging policy and practice.

"Unlocking creative potential can be incredibly powerful. It can influence arts and culture and contribute positively to democratic decision-making in civic life. Creativity has a proven benefit to problem solving, ideas generation, conflict resolution and contributes to richer thinking. With great facilitation creativity can be channelled to other areas of public life — in public health, education, social services, housing and elsewhere."  
— Cultural Democracy in Practice<sup>12</sup>

## DERBY MUSEUMS: REVITALISING THE CITY CENTRE THROUGH A CULTURE OF MAKING

Derby Museums run three museums and galleries across Derby's city centre, including the new £17million Museum of Making which was due to open this autumn. When the museums closed, they lost about 40% of their income which would usually be earned and needed to raise an additional £1million to cover delays in the construction of the Museum of Making. Three quarters of the staff were furloughed, and initially attention was focused on fundraising and preparing to reopen: "It became clear to us at the beginning that the usefulness of organisations like ours was always going to be after the emergency phase", explains Executive Director, Tony Butler.

As they look towards recovery, Derby Museums have been working with cultural partners and the local council to strategically develop their role within the future city centre. Approximately 40% of the retail shops that shut in Derby during lockdown won't reopen, and almost half the office space is vacant. Even before COVID-19, Derby's industrial structure made the city centre particularly vulnerable. The city council were quick to get a Recovery Task Force together and have been paying new, heightened attention to the role culture will play in the city's economic recovery. With eight Arts Council NPOs across a small, dense city centre, culture has huge potential to reinvigorate civic life, and schemes such as the Make and Trade Zone are already being explored. In this context, Derby Museums is building upon its specialism in coproduction to reconsider its role as a place-maker, civic space, and magnet for the city's collective cultural and social life.

[www.derbymuseums.org](http://www.derbymuseums.org)

## The rebirth of the high street

"The high street, more than anything, is a very visual representation of the well-being of an area. And danger is that the sort of people who are going to lead us out of this situation are trying to model themselves on the past. The return of the shopping bag won't be the answer to all of this. The energy won't come from town planners, new paving stones, or vinyl on the windows of empty shops. We've got to come up with think bigger. How do you repopulate the high street with ideas, animation, people and energy?" — Robin Hutchinson, Director, Community Brain

With many large and small businesses entering into administration or announcing closures as an immediate result of the lockdown, and many more to come, it is likely town centres will shift even more away from retail focus in the future. As investment and attention is turned towards our empty shop fronts, there is an opportunity for town centres to be more socially and creatively diverse, and thereby more economically resilient.

How can high streets be reimagined and rebirthed as new civic agoras that offers opportunities and experiences that do not – and cannot – exist online? Empty high street shops could be reclaimed by councils and neighbourhood groups as flexible shared community and arts spaces,

## STRATEGIC APPROACHES TO CULTURE-LED REGENERATION

A research programme by the LGA Culture, Tourism and Sport Board culminated in the publication of the report *Culture-led regeneration: Achieving inclusive and sustainable growth*<sup>13</sup>. The report highlights 15 local culture-led regeneration projects that have positively impacted local communities. The case studies represent broadly four strategic approaches:

- **INDIVIDUAL CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS AND ATTRACTIONS** that act as a hub and focal point and a driving force for regeneration.
- **COMMUNITY-FOCUSED** cultural programmes.
- **STRATEGIC CO-ORDINATION OF CULTURAL ACTIVITY**, where councils have invested in a long-term strategic body or partnership to deliver cultural infrastructure and activities.
- **RECURRING ARTS AND CULTURAL FESTIVALS** as a focal point for cultural-led regeneration.

The report identifies the importance of a shared vision for the future of a place as the foundation for successful schemes. Boldness and ambition are needed to both plan and realise the project, whilst the culture that is celebrated and art that is made must be authentic to the place and local people.

and offer opportunities to incubate fledgling cultural and social enterprises. Interventions could prioritise space and resources for minority groups who have suffered from historical land and space inequalities, learning from mechanisms like the Black Land and Spatial Justice Fund<sup>14</sup>. Shared and community-owned approaches to space, like the work of London's Creative Land Trust<sup>15</sup>, can help stabilise our cultural ecosystems and build resilience into our creative economies.

Local authorities and community groups don't need to start from scratch but can look at what has worked in the past and how arts and culture have successfully been used to drive regeneration and change the way that places are perceived. We know that major cultural projects have been used successfully to boost economic development. Significant amounts of public and private money – including the Heritage Lottery Funds Great Place Scheme, the Northern Cultural Regeneration Fund, and the government's Cultural Development Fund – are being invested into this work to revitalise neighbourhoods, towns and cities, and improve employment and economic prospects within a place. Smaller

### ART REFUGE'S CORONAQUILT: USING ART THERAPY TO SUPPORT CONNECTIVITY AND HOPE

Art Refuge uses art and art therapy to support the mental health and wellbeing of people displaced due to conflict, persecution and poverty, usually through face-to-face work in Calais and Bristol. Their specialism in crisis support means they have found themselves uniquely placed to continue working through the pandemic. In March 2020 they quickly but carefully set up Coronaquilt as a platform to continue creative connections at a time of isolation and emotional distress. Participants from all backgrounds, and anywhere in the world, are invited to contribute a square photography, drawing, or piece of embroidery as part of a shared online quilt, themed "Rituals of the Everyday".

The project ethos has been taken up by other organisations in the UK and France, and enabled Art Refuge to both strengthen its existing partnerships and create new ones. Barts Health NHS Trust Art Therapy team has been inspired to set up an online arts-based support forum through which healthcare staff can reflect on the daily rituals that help them cope and hope better. The Art Refuge team has begun to additionally support foster carers through online artmaking, using the Coronaquilt gallery as a resource. So far, there have been over 900 contributions to the virtual Coronaquilt from 25 countries, while schools and community groups across the UK (including refugee projects) have been inspired to make their own versions which have fed back into Art Refuge's main Coronaquilt.

[www.coronaquilt.org/](http://www.coronaquilt.org/)  
[www.artrefuge.org.uk](http://www.artrefuge.org.uk)

community-scale initiatives such as play areas, libraries, parks and public arts projects also have enormous potential to influence people's local cultural journeys. Many of these concepts can be applied to the latent potential of empty high streets.

## A regenerative recovery centred around mental health and wellbeing

The adverse impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on people's mental health and wellbeing<sup>16</sup> means that these issues are likely to be a continued area of focus for public policy and local services. Arts and creativity are already recognised as crucial to personal wellbeing and a way to express appreciation and connection with others. In recent years the effectiveness of arts and culture interventions in health services has been increasingly recognised, by Public Health England, the Department of Health, the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Arts, Health and Wellbeing, the Association of Directors of Public Health, the Royal Society for Public Health and the What Works Centre for Wellbeing amongst others. These interventions have been recognised in **cultural commissioning** models which engage arts and culture organisations in public sector procurement of services

to improve individual and community wellbeing, and through **social prescribing** whereby GPs and other primary care professionals make non-medical referrals to community and creative activities<sup>17</sup>.

Health and social services will inevitably undergo changes both in direct response to COVID-19, and as a result of its economic effects. Local authorities and health services will face a challenging combination of intensified demands and budget cuts. In this context, cultural inventions can play an important role in prevention, early intervention and reducing people's need for acute services. Commissioners could examine how they can build relationships with and capacity within the cultural sector to respond to these commissions, as well as redesign procurement and evaluation approaches to welcome arts organisations into these programmes<sup>18</sup>. The foundations for the success of this work will be strong strategic links between health and social care providers, community leaders, and arts organisations who have already built up trusted relationships in their communities and have experience of mental health and wellbeing provision.

Care should be taken not to fall into the trap of seeing culture as a replacement for social services, a well-designed social security system, or targeted mental health support like counselling and medication where it is needed. Whilst the organisations we spoke to recognised the positive impact their work has on their participants' mental wellbeing, they were keen not to be seen as mental health professionals, be relied on to replace these specialist services, or do work outside their training and expertise. To keep this distinction clear we need to be able to clearly articulate the soft, social and relational role of the arts in knitting together communities and inspiring hope.

"In the past the arts have been seen as something you do as a hobby, after you have basic needs met. But actually, creativity is fundamental to being human. It helps you to feel better about yourself. We need to be clear about that joint messaging."  
— Jill Cole, Director, Northern Heartlands, Barnard Castle

"During lockdown we have been running a phone chatting service. One of the social organisations who refers to the phone line offered to train our volunteers in mental health first aid, but this isn't something they want to be pressured into. We don't want to replace specialist support." — Louise Yates, Director, Back to Ours Hull

[“You can’t really separate arts, culture, welfare and health. To many communities, especially so-called ‘marginalised communities’, these things are inseparable; art is not a luxury, it’s survival.”](#) — Zain Dada, Programme Manager, Maslaha

## Redefining the world of work

The events of the last few months have disrupted traditional working patterns like no other event in living memory. In some cases people have found time to pursue new hobbies or learn new skills; in others the crisis has exacerbated existing precarities and inequalities in the labour market. Within the arts sector the inequalities have been sharpest between self-employed and employed workers; front-of-house and office workers; those with and without caring responsibilities; and those new to vs. established within the sector.

The pandemic has also shown us how quickly huge changes in policy and our working lives can be made. Through the furlough scheme the government has intervened in the labour market like never before. As we recover from the initial stages of the pandemic it is likely that further, active labour market policies will follow – and with them opportunities to recognise the value of creative skills and talents. Recent years have shown increasing government interest in the role of the creative industries in our economy. The Government’s 2017/18 industrial strategy named the creative industries as a government priority and ‘the heart of the nation’s competitive advantage’<sup>19</sup>. Although jobs have been lost as a result of the immediate economic disruption from COVID-19, rebuilding the nation’s workforce will require a strategic approach to identifying jobs that will stand the test of time and be resilient against future economic trends. There is potential for creative and cultural expertise to be woven throughout the redesign of a number of different sectors and industries.

In relation to individual experiences of work, several of the artists we interviewed have highlighted the enormous value they found in Art Council England’s emergency individual grants – it was the first time many were able to slow-down, think and experiment without fixed outputs or timeframes. As a result, they have been able to create more considered, socially impactful work. The success of this non-conditional funding model sets a precedent for the future, and has inspired many to

reconsider the potential of Universal Basic Income as a way to rebalance conventional and outdated notions of work and leisure.

Whilst the bold labour market policies the government pursued during lockdown were widely welcomed, their shortcomings were acutely felt in the arts sector with many freelancers falling through the gaps in government support entirely. There are genuine concerns that young and diverse talent will be permanently lost from the sector unless support is found. Although this precarity does not uniquely affect cultural workers, the sector has a chance to show leadership in addressing structural imbalances in employment practices and pay scales.

These are just three examples of how the arts and culture sector can adapt and respond to the wider need for brave and bold public solutions to the fault lines that have been exposed and entrenched by the pandemic. More will emerge as further consequences from the pandemic come to light. What is clear from our interviews and focus groups is the desire and energy to respond to the opportunities ahead for positive systemic change. To make a persuasive case for the social and civic role of arts, organisations need to be able to make clear links between community resilience, and wider cultural fulfilment and resilience, demonstrating how these outcomes can be realised together. In the final chapter we outline a broad set of foundational principles which may help arts organisations stay purposeful in the context of rapidly changing external forces.



5.

# Conclusion: Foundational principles for the future

The early stages of the COVID-19 crisis cannot be underestimated in terms of the pressures and strains that have impacted arts and culture organisations and the communities and places in which they operate. But it has also shone a light on powerful things that can happen through collaboration, adaptation and innovation. We have seen how art organisations can and do sit at the heart of a community's social infrastructure, and were able to mobilise their relationships both within the local arts ecosystem and with wider civil society. There are clear opportunities to embed the lessons learned and catalyse further actions as we navigate the next stages of the pandemic and look towards recovery.

Our research has sought to connect the dots between what has been happening in local communities in recent months, the lessons that can be applied from individual arts organisations to strengthen the sector as a whole, and the systemic forces that may shape the future of our cultural lives. These are inherently connected – actions and decisions now lay the groundwork for the recovery. Harnessing the longer-term opportunities to reshape our cultural lives can only happen alongside a shift in mindset and practice that is embedded within arts organisations themselves. A number of principles and values underpin this shift and were already evident in the organisations who demonstrated resilience, creativity and adaptability in their COVID-19 responses.

These principles overlap and intersect in meaningful ways. As principles, rather than prescriptive templates to follow, they can be scaled up or scaled down for any size of organisation, and intersect with more specific mission or values – from diversity to sustainability or care – in their application. Together, we suggest, they may provide foundations for embedding the enabling factors we set out in Chapter Two, and frame mutual goals for local cultural ecosystems.

## Understanding the value of the arts as social infrastructure

Symbolic visualisations of 'culture' usually depict an outline of a grand building with thick Corinthian columns in front; that is to say that when we think about arts and culture there is a tendency to think about institutions or objects rather than the webs of creativity that connect people and their experiences.

The COVID-19 context has highlighted a stark reality that many prized institutions aren't very socially resilient, their large staff teams, complex decision-making structures and high fixed costs mean they can't adapt quickly to people's and communities' changing needs. Meanwhile, less formalised organisations and partnerships, with agile governance structures, high community participation, and flexible spaces were able to quickly refocus their purpose in the new context.

While smaller arts organisations were more likely to be able to adapt quickly in the early stages of the pandemic for these reasons, larger organisations are also now starting to demonstrate their civic purpose more forcefully. Many of these organisations have the relationships, resources, topical expertise and back-office support that form a vital part of 'soft' infrastructure in communities. As they are reopening, arts institutions have a chance to regain trust by making themselves more porous – inviting in new thinking, partnerships, and people so that creative endeavours are synonymous with social good.

[“When it comes to thinking about the distribution of resources, we are trying to think infrastructurally rather than institutionally. Institutionalism isn't just a spatial thing to do with buildings and organisations, it permeates into people's thinking. We are trying to slowly work towards a point where the institution no longer needs to exist. For us the starting point is building more equitable societies and resilient communities.”](#)

— Akil Scafe-Smith, Co-Founder, RESOLVE

[“The shock of COVID-19 could be an opportunity for community centres and arts spaces to embed an ownership infrastructure so that these assets can be there for generations. We've seen through the pandemic how these spaces offer not only arts and cultural value, but health and social value. These community assets could either be the things we decide to sacrifice, or they could be the spaces we decide we value. There could be a fundamental rethink around how public space works.”](#)

— Zain Dada, Programme Manager, Maslaha

#### COMMUNITY BRAIN: CREATING PLAYGROUNDS FOR CREATIVE EXPERIMENTATION

Community Brain are a cultural organisation based in Surbiton (Greater London), who use local people's natural talents and creativity to develop community cohesion. Their approach is based on asset-based principles and a firm belief in their role as community enablers, providing the platforms and infrastructure for people to realise their energies and talents and do what they want to do.

Community Brain's commitment to supporting others shaped their response to the pandemic. At the beginning of lockdown, they conducted a community-wide survey to understand the needs and priorities in their community, and opened a virtual 'grand hall' on Zoom where anyone could drop in and have a chat. This fostered discussion and ideas for creative projects. They have also run a series of projects which enable people to record and share their experience through lockdown, and turned their physical high street exhibition space – the Museum of Futures – into a community kitchen. All these activities can be summarised as facilitating and de-risking creativity for other people to try out ideas, experiment, and grapple with what the 'new normal' might look like. “We weren't planning for COVID-19”, says Director Robin Hutchinson, “but we were planning for the fact that people are going to want to own more of their life. And, if we can give them that confidence to believe, they can do it. Real creativity only happens when people trust people to do something.”

[www.thecommunitybrain.org](http://www.thecommunitybrain.org)

## Prioritising co-creation, not outreach

There was a time when the impact and value of an arts venue was assessed by its audience turnout or ticket sales. However over recent years there has been a steadily growing movement within the arts sector and wider civil society to move from traditional models of participation and outreach – when people are invited to join in with the existing work of an artist or organisation – to co-creation in which all participants in a project are active and equal partners from the outset.

In the early stages of the pandemic, organisations that used co-creation principles were uniquely well placed to understand their community's' and participants' changing needs and priorities. Disruption of existing public programmes and activities may present a chance to take stock and deeply embed co-creation methods into future work. The crisis has changed or exacerbated multiple challenges at a community level – and as a result the methods previously used may no longer address these challenges effectively. Radical new inclusive and collaborative approaches are needed to creatively develop solutions to the problems we face as a society.

Co-creation methods may be applied in a number of ways to organisational values, operations, decision-making processes, programme delivery, and

### THE NEWBRIDGE PROJECT: BROKERING COMMUNITY SOLIDARITY AND ARTISTIC CO-CREATION

Based in meanwhile spaces in Newcastle and Gateshead, The NewBridge Project is an artist-led community supporting the development of artists and curators through the provision of space, opportunities and an artist-led programme of exhibitions, commissions and events. Prior to lockdown they had been working on a long-term project called 'For Solidarity' to recognise, celebrate and link up projects working for social good in the North East. They aim to embed principles of care into these relationships by building-in capacity for connections to be built slowly and collaboratively, for example through secondments, shared meals, and socials.

This network gave them strong roots to respond sensitively and quickly to COVID-19. Aware of digital exclusion in their communities, partners across the network worked together to make and distribute 5000 'lockdown gazette' physical newsletters. The paper was designed to be accessible to children and adults, with activities, recipes and signposting to support services, and were included in food parcels and mutual aid deliveries.

To embed these relationships further moving forward, The NewBridge Project has launched a call-out for Co-Investigators – people within the community who will be paid to 'report back' on what they have observed or experienced during this time. This aims to bring new and unheard voices into the organisation. Future artistic programming will be based on what they learn from the Investigators' experiences during the pandemic, and their current needs, and priorities for the future.

[www.newbridge.solidarityeconomy.coop/about](http://www.newbridge.solidarityeconomy.coop/about)

influencing and advocacy work. It is crucial that co-creation processes value diverse experiences, talent and knowledge, and shift power towards people and partners whose agency have traditionally been overlooked. Therefore, embedding co-creation doesn't just mean changing the way which organisations design standalone programmes, but a more fundamental examination of how they work, and who they work *with*.

"The assumption that the artists are not part of the community is very old school. When you are underrepresented in the arts, you come with your community and you are part of it. This is something that's not often done at a professional level." — Lora Krasteva, Founder, Global Voices Theatre

"This work can no longer be a numbers game. It's actually about having deeper experiences with smaller groups of people. What we find transformative is either a small intensive experience, or doing something immersive and longitudinal. We need to talk to funders about how we tweak our metrics and evaluate our work differently." — Tina Redford, Director, LeftCoast

### SLUNG LOW: ENABLING A ROOTED COMMUNITY RESPONSE THROUGH SHARED LEADERSHIP STRUCTURES

Based in Holbeck (Leeds), Slung Low is a theatre company who specialise in large-scale outdoor performances. Alongside performances, Slung Low run The Holbeck men's working club, and a free Cultural Community College from a converted double-decker bus. Slung Low's work during the pandemic has been widely celebrated: from becoming the centre for social care referrals in Holbeck; to coordinating food deliveries; creating the open-air Lamppost Art Gallery; putting on outdoor socially-distanced performances; and broadcasting an online game show You Can Bet!

Underpinning Slung Low's quick and responsive adaptation to the crisis are strong community links, a clear set of values, and an agile leadership structure. Slung Low is not a charity, but a company limited by one, £1 share belonging to Artistic Director Alan Lane. This structure enables Alan to keep responsibility close and allow the company to take riskier decisions. To counterbalance this, the organisation aims to give away as much power as possible by paying all staff the same wage and by operating three advisory boards: a governance board; a community advisory board; and an educators' board. This builds accountability into the organisation, whilst enabling the flexible and fast decision-making that was crucial when the pandemic hit. To embed closer community connections into these groups, Slung Low use diversity quotas to make sure Holbeck is always fully and fairly represented. Through supporting complexity within their community, ensuring representation, carving out autonomy, and giving away power, Slung Low is pioneering new models of mixed, shared, and democratic cultural leadership.

[www.slunglow.org](http://www.slunglow.org)

## Empowering new models of dispersed leadership

A moment of crisis often is reflected in a strong need for careful and clear leadership – from government, in specific sectors, in local communities, and in personal networks and families. A number of our interviewees pointed out that within the arts sector, many 'conventional' leaders fell silent while new leaders emerged. Organisations and partnerships that had dispersed models of leadership, where many people had the capacity and trust to make decisions, demonstrated particular resilience – if staff fell sick or went on furlough, the work could still continue as a wider range of people had real ownership in the project.

The impact of COVID-19 requires careful reflection about what models of leadership are best serving the talent in the arts, and how leadership influences the civic and social impact in the communities in which arts and culture organisations are based. Cultural institutions in the UK are still led and defined by a relatively narrow demographic who not only hold power within the institution and local ecosystems, but influence what we understand to be creative

## GRIZEDALE ARTS: A NEW KIND OF DEMOCRATIC ARTS INSTITUTION

Based in the Lake District but working internationally, Grizedale Arts curates and commissions contemporary art to foster connections within and between local and creative communities through residencies, trans-local learning programmes, and community shops. Grizedale purposefully keeps its permanent staff team down to two part-time people and employs all other artists and staff on a freelance basis at a standard rate of pay. This light structure has meant they were able to nimbly respond to the crisis. Alongside COVID-specific responses like weekly meal deliveries to the community, Instagram open days, remote writing and architectural commissions, and a postal recipe exchange project for town residents, Grizedale has used this time to work towards building a new kind of arts institution – a speculative project they hope will be a model for new governance, creative and democratic structures within the wider sector.

A derelict pub in the town will serve as the institution's home and income source, and will be owned and governed through community shares. Believing that "institutions won't be able to dismantle themselves", Grizedale is putting freelance artists and local residents at the heart of imagining this new institution. The institution will embed principles of community ownership and democratic governance, as well as horizontal management. By changing how the institution is run they also expect to change what is displayed and what culture is understood to be – showing objects of use that hold cultural value, like self-build projects for example. The institution will advocate for the "role of creativity as a vital, everyday component of a successful, progressive and diverse society".

[www.grizedale.org/writing/blog/1178858/building-a-new-institution](http://www.grizedale.org/writing/blog/1178858/building-a-new-institution)

and cultural. This forms a vicious circle in which well-funded arts institutions cater to, and are led by, a narrow elite<sup>20</sup>.

"Many leaders thinking about the dance of survival but there is a deeper need in the dreaming further, with a real intentional focus on the "who": who is equipped to dream, who is equipped to lead, whose vision needs to be unlearned and relearned?"— Nina Simon, CEO, OF/BY/FOR ALL

If a new, more diverse generation of cultural leaders is emerging – through localised responses to the pandemic but also due to the resurgence of national conversations like the Black Lives Matter movement – there is an important chance to not only be more representative, but to share power more equitably. The crisis has demonstrated that there is a practical as well as moral case to be made for these new models of dispersed leadership and shared ownership. In practice this may look like models of consortium working, community ownership, pay structures, participatory budgeting, cocreation, innovative governance, and more. Realising these principles in practice requires concerted support from those who already exert power and leadership in the sector, as well as funders and policy makers.

These three principles sit within a wider framework of cultural democracy – "an approach to arts and culture that actively engages everyone in deciding what counts as culture, where it happens, who makes it, and who experiences it"<sup>21</sup>. They underpin the potential for arts and cultural organisations to deeply embed culture and creativity within systemic approaches to building community resilience, and become more resilient and future-proofed as a sector as a result. Wider civil society could also take inspiration from the distinct creative and relational role which arts organisations bring to their communities, and how this translates into vital social infrastructure.

In keeping with these principles we recognise that this research project has mainly been informed by conversations with arts practitioners and cultural professionals. Wider, tailored and hyperlocal conversations are needed to ask everyday citizens what kind of cultural lives they want to lead in the next stages of the pandemic, the recovery and beyond, and how the arts and cultural ecology can respond. We hope that this report may stimulate some of these conversations to happen.

# Acknowledgements

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