

COMMON GROUND

REWILDING THE GARDEN

RECONNECTING WITH OVERLOOKED,
SELF-CULTIVATING CULTURE IN OUR COMMUNITIES



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Foreword by David Bryan, Chair of Voluntary Arts



Class inequality and discrimination has been a concern for decades. These are issues that will continue to grace the manifestos of all political parties for many years. Yet it was Brexit and the 2019 UK General Election that made us all aware of just how polarised our society has become. Many will attribute the decline to austerity and the lack of infrastructure – be it employment, health, transport or social and cultural infrastructure. In some ways the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 has appeared to act as a leveller: we do seem to be “all in it together”. But looking closer at the way lockdown affected people the deep divisions in society remain all too obvious. Unemployment rose, the low paid were driven to work longer and in challenging circumstances, low-paid key workers and the self-employed accessed food banks, the people’s solution to a structural problem. The privilege of having a garden and a good broadband connection, while others less fortunate contend with multiple hardships, small flats, no income and rising debt, is all too apparent. In many cases, the polarisation resulting from long-term neglect and underinvestment in infrastructure is exacerbated, despite the community spirit that rallies to provide support.

The lack of investment in the North of England is an issue going back decades and while local authorities buffered some of the worst aspects, their capacity to do more was impeded, if not eradicated, during the decade of austerity. Charitable trusts kept telling themselves that this, the absence of a local state intervention, would return and normality prevail: it hasn't.

And we are all becoming increasingly aware of the knock-on effect of infrastructure erosion. A local authority withdraws a service due to limited finances, even if a community or families are in need.

The hope is that the private sector will step in. If there is no money they will not. Then we turn to the charitable sector, who can bring innovation but are unable to provide mass solutions because no funding leads to no service. And finally we are left to those wonderful citizens who give their time, their energies, their determination and their love to ensure that communities of care exist. These understated community champions will hold together the spirit when everyone else is gone. They need support, advice, encouragement and affirmation. Day after day they build trust, they create a focus for communities and they can teach us all about harnessing the abilities of those around us.

Communities - with arts and social voluntary organisations, and the legions of volunteers - have been left/abandoned to fend for themselves. It was as if the free market had determined that post-industrial regions and scattered rural communities requiring infrastructural support and connectivity were no longer instrumental to the needs of global finance and capital, and these people and their lives had no worth. The long standing societal structural flaw, of jobs, creative talent and financial resources centred around the South of England, often to the detriment of the other UK nations and regions, was irreversible. Yet these areas, while sharing similar challenges of modernisation, offer huge and diverse potential for locally driven and inclusive development. This long-standing disregard and indifference requires a bold reinvention of local economies and a championing of, and most importantly by, the local people who have held the civic fabric together. We have been fortunate as a nation to bear witness to the generosity of everyday people providing care, food and creative joy.

For many years personal creativity has not been valued. Self-cultivating culture was not recognised by national cultural policy and the dominant art infrastructure; and the neglect we see now is not an accident. Our over-reliance on the dominant institutions neither leads to a rebalancing or a departure from the usual suspects that are already enriched. In these unprecedented times we need to open our thinking and change entrenched behaviours, if we are to create sustainable improvements to all aspects of our lives.

FOREWORD

It is fascinating to see how lockdown prompted a huge increase in people undertaking everyday creative activity at home and a growing interest in how creativity can support mental wellbeing, particularly during an unprecedented period of global fear and uncertainty. This report predates the Coronavirus crisis but it demonstrates the staggering amount of creative cultural activity that has been taking place in almost all our communities for many decades, unnoticed by many and largely led by volunteers.

Voluntary Arts has consistently and successfully supported tens of thousands of local creative cultural groups across the UK and Ireland over nearly 30 years. Our organisation has extensive knowledge drawn from many years of working with particular communities in England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. We have been a provider of advice and guidance, a producer of events, a facilitator and encourager of localised creativity that both enriches life and forges a civic cohesion. Our interventions build trust, affirm communities and inspire self worth: we propagate where others ignore. Over the past 10 years our Up for Arts projects in partnership with BBC local radio stations have worked with undervalued, unknown amateur arts groups in areas including Merseyside, Lancashire, Cumbria, York, Stoke-on-Trent, Humberside, London and Wales. Other Voluntary Arts projects have developed civic pride and engagement, through local voluntary arts networks in Derry/Londonderry, Mid and East Antrim, Dún Laoghaire, Paisley and Perth. In 2019, our project in partnership with Welsh public libraries established new creative groups in under-served areas. And each year Voluntary Arts pays a public tribute to the endeavours of active creative citizens through the national Epic Awards which celebrate innovation and excellence in the voluntary arts: an event that acknowledges the value and impact of the work and its creative citizens.

In 2017 Voluntary Arts started a national programme of 'Open Conversations' involving experts, practitioners and organisers involved in creative cultural activity in a variety of communities across the UK and the Republic of Ireland – specifically including areas of economic deprivation. Our intention was to make an important contribution to the desperately under-researched challenges of 'class' diversity in the arts. This report summarises our findings. We hope it will prove valuable to policymakers, funders, membership organisations, creative citizens and support agencies across the cultural and voluntary sectors.

The report concludes by proposing the 'Common Ground Pact' - three simple pledges to address the challenges facing creative cultural activity in communities across the UK and Ireland. We invite funders, policymakers and other support agencies to support the Common Ground Pact and join us in rewilding the garden.

David Bryan

April 2020



Executive Summary

'Enriching Britain: Culture, Creativity and Growth – The 2015 Report by the Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Value' suggested that the wealthiest, better educated, least ethnically diverse 8% of the population forms the most culturally active segment, making up: 28% of live theatre audiences; 44% of live music and 28% of visual arts (<https://warwick.ac.uk/research/warwickcommission/futureculture/finalreport/>).

The UK referendum on EU membership in June 2016 highlighted dramatic divisions between and within communities across the UK. While there is evidence that these divisions broadly reflect socio-economic differences, there is a risk of oversimplifying an incredibly complex situation. What is clear is that the referendum revealed that many communities across Britain feel disconnected, disillusioned and forgotten by the establishment.

These feelings closely mirror the feedback Voluntary Arts collected during its 12-month programme of 'Open Conversations' in 2015-16 which looked at creative cultural activity in different minority ethnic communities (<https://www.voluntaryarts.org/news/open-conversations>). Voluntary Arts conducted interviews with Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) experts, practitioners and organisers involved in creative cultural activity in communities across the UK. The challenge, we discovered, is not that BAME communities do not participate in creative cultural activity to the same degree but rather that much of the activity that takes place in these communities is not recognised or valued more widely and is not connected to public support.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This sense that BAME creative cultural activity is often under-recognised could also be applied to most grassroots cultural activity.

The Report of the Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Value goes on to say:

“Traditionally, concerns over broadening participation have concentrated on tackling the social stratification of cultural and creative consumption with varying degrees of success. However, the Commission is keen to emphasise that equal attention needs to be placed on the making of culture and creative expression, whether in the context of the Cultural and Creative Industries or as amateur activity.” [3.1, p.32]

“The value of everyday cultural activities needs to be more fully acknowledged and supported. The amateur and voluntary sector may be of pivotal importance in spearheading a creative participation revolution.” [3.2.4, p.37]

While there is often a correlation between the most economically deprived communities and the areas where measured engagement in the arts is lowest, this tends to reflect what gets measured.

A second programme of ‘Open Conversations’ undertaken by Voluntary Arts from 2017-19 has now revealed a huge amount of existing creative activity in almost every part of the country. This activity is often unfunded, amateur, everyday creativity rather than professional arts but it is no less valuable. This report summarises the learning from this major national exploration of grassroots cultural activity.

We identified three overarching benefits that arise from taking part in creative cultural activity:

- social connectedness and community identity
- fun and enjoyment - “My time”
- positive impacts on participants’ health and wellbeing

We also categorised three requisites for local creative cultural activity:

- space
- creative citizens
- recognition

Our Open Conversations revealed ways in which each of these three requisites is currently under threat.

The evidence we gathered points to the need for three key actions to address these current threats:

1. Opening up more public spaces for creative cultural activity
2. Building strong connections and relationships to support participation in creative cultural activity
3. Demonstrating how taking part in creative cultural activity improves social connectedness

We now call on funders, policymakers and other support agencies to join Voluntary Arts in a new Charter to take these actions forward.

By better understanding the culture people choose to practice themselves, in their own time, at their own expense, we believe it might be possible to address the widespread feeling of disconnection and disillusionment in many communities. By uncovering and cultivating our common ground - rewilding the garden - we could begin to see more of the diverse creativity that brings people together and to truly value the areas too often dismissed as forgotten cracks or cultural wastelands.

What we did

In May 2018 Voluntary Arts launched a national programme of Open Conversations to learn more about how creative cultural activity is organised in local communities across the country.

We wanted to know more about the creative activity local people are taking part in, how they started, how the activity is organised, who takes part, why they do it and what they get out of it.

Our aim was to surface and celebrate the full extent of voluntary and amateur creative activity within different communities of place and interest, which predominantly exists without the support of public funds. Ultimately, we wanted to explore whether the shared undertaking of creative activity has a part to play in contributing to the reconciliation of divisions within communities.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During 2017-19 Voluntary Arts undertook 88 Open Conversations across the UK and the Republic of Ireland. In total we spoke to 368 people involved in local creative cultural activity. These were a mixture of 70 individual and 18 group conversations, with 10 conducted in Welsh. The conversations took place across the whole of Wales; in towns in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland; in both urban and very remote rural areas of Scotland; and in often-neglected communities in the North West of England. Our conversations took us from Ballyogan in Dún Laoghaire–Rathdown, Ireland; to Cumnock in East Ayrshire, Scotland; to Oldham in England; to Abergavenny in Wales; and Mid & East Antrim in Northern Ireland.

The Voluntary Arts ‘Open Conversations’ model

In 2015 the Voluntary Arts BAME Advisory Panel developed an approach for its programme of interviews with the organisers of BAME creative cultural activity in communities across the UK which became known as ‘Open Conversations.’

The Panel noted that representatives from BAME communities often feel over-consulted. Too many agencies would descend on a community, take information and then leave. Rare was the courtesy of an update or explanation of how the data was used or even what was deduced from it. Some felt that it was like being in a zoo – watched and observed but little changed. The opportunity to develop a dialogue or a relationship were avoided and the benefits of real understanding let alone interaction missed.

The approach Voluntary Arts took with its interviews was initiating simple open conversations and building relationships, rather than more formal consultation. These open conversations create real dialogues and build trust.

Open conversations emphasised the importance of Voluntary Arts wanting to listen rather than to question – using the skills of active listening. People have a need to speak, to be heard and seen – and to talk to others doing the same thing elsewhere.

Open Conversations:

- Are long-form exploratory conversations
- Take place in informal settings - with us going to talk to people where they are, rather than requiring them to come to us
- Are deliberately unstructured conversations, the agenda/shape and direction of the conversation being determined by those in the room
- Start by simply asking people to talk about their creative cultural activity
- Encourage and enable all voices to speak, share their stories, experiences and thoughts/feelings
- Emphasise the importance of attentive listening
- Provide space for more open-ended exploration and responses
- Work best while sharing food and drink
- Are documented immediately after (rather than during) the conversation
- Keep note-taking to a minimum - encouraging active listening and conversation in the moment
- Can be facilitated group conversations as well as one-to-one conversations
- End by asking those present to recommend who we should go to speak to next, thereby extending beyond our existing networks and contacts

Open Conversations are, in themselves, collective acts of cultural creativity.

See: www.voluntaryarts.org/open-conversations

Findings

Across the UK and the Republic of Ireland, we found similarities between voluntary arts activities across all types of community: Factors that were repeatedly identified as crucial to varied forms of collaborative creativity taking place included the commitment and drive of members of the community to make these happen and the positive outcomes experienced by those taking part and the wider community.

Requisites

Although our conversations uncovered some areas where there was a lack of groups practicing certain artforms, we didn't discover any wastelands: communities entirely devoid of creative shoots. However the nature of the activity was affected by contextual variants, such as areas' heritage, population size and dispersal, socio-economic conditions and the unique opportunities and challenges offered by the physical spaces or the skills and interests local community members share.

In Wales, for instance, where we undertook country-wide mapping, we didn't find any correlation between the numbers of voluntary arts groups in a local authority area and relative social deprivation. Our mapping suggested that the numbers of creative groups were more strongly linked to population. For example, Rhondda Cynon Taf is the third most populous county, and has the second highest number of arts groups in Wales.

Neighbouring Merthyr Tydfil, the least populous county, has the lowest number of voluntary arts groups. Both these areas are comparable in terms of the percentage of Lower Super Output Areas in the most deprived 20% in Wales: 29.9 for Rhondda Cynon Taf and 30.6 for Merthyr Tydfil (based on WIMD data from 2014).

Our research approach did not aim to interrogate or provide detailed analysis of these variants, but we did find common threads among the local character and interests encountered across these communities. We identified several broad 'themes' that many of the groups expressed as being essential requisites for local creative cultural activity



Picture from the Open Conversation held in Ballyogan's local community.

Requisite 1: Space





Picture of the Foleshill Creates group based in a part of Coventry, England, with challenges including food poverty



REQUISITE 1

Certain conditions enable grassroots creative groups to thrive, and public policy decisions about buildings, transport, even public toilets, have implications for the cultural life of communities, and – consequently – the wellbeing of individuals. These physical ‘enablers’ are vital to ensure people can participate in the cultural life of their neighbourhoods.

The importance of appropriate and available community venues was a recurring theme throughout the conversations. Beyond kitchen tables and bedroom desks, people need places to meet, to rehearse, to practice and to perform. The transfer of public assets to community ownership, although welcome, is not relevant to the vast majority of voluntary arts groups, who don’t have the capital or desire to own a building. We learned that a lot of informal creative activity takes place in church halls, community centres, pub function rooms and libraries: much of this is unconstituted and a significant proportion happens alongside other activities that might not be considered ‘creative.’



EXAMPLE: OPEN CONVERSATION, BALLYMENA, OCTOBER 2017



Using printed maps and sticky notes, participants were given an exercise to physically identify and locate the spaces where creative and cultural activity is happening in their area.

In the 'Mid-Antrim'/ Ballymena area there appeared to be two distinct hubs of activity in the town at the Braid and at Midtown Makers, located in the Ballymena Business Centre.

REQUISITE 1

Many of the open conversations happened in community hubs that were used by those that attended. Some of these were public venues such as libraries, others community spaces. Regular meeting places allow groups to develop, beyond immediate and existing social circles, providing neutral and shared ground for people to come together to share skills.

Groups in areas such as Blackpool felt that the significant formal cultural offer from arts venues and large spectacles on their door-step, such as the annual illuminations or new Creative People and Places work throughout the town (supported by Arts Council England), brought atmosphere and inspiration that influenced community led activity. The group in Oldham also expressed that they valued relationships with formal arts venues, reflecting that these opportunities offered enjoyment and variety beyond the space where they met regularly as a self-led group, but could attend with the social connection and support of the group.

In Ireland, conversations in Ballyogan, Ballymena, East and Mid-Antrim and Larne showed the role that different spaces played in shaping or enabling the creative activities that happen there, from 'men's sheds' to mills, streets and gardens or heritage spaces. Social and community agencies such as churches, youth clubs and community forums as well as the 'growing cafe culture' were highlighted as features that allowed 'creativity to thrive.'

We also heard that libraries are sometimes preferred because they are shared civic spaces: jointly occupied by different members of the community, and not the province of any one group. In Wales we surveyed the nature and extent of creative activities offered by, or taking place in public libraries. The survey (with responses from 19 of the 22 Local Authority areas) revealed the varied benefits to individuals of the creative activities offered by libraries: improved health and wellbeing, and increased social interaction were cited as two of the main benefits.

Respondents said:

- "The informal setting of libraries makes access to creative arts easier."
- "Great for providing a non-threatening social environment for people to meet."
- "It would be great if libraries could start being thought of as an everyday place to participate in the creative arts."

In the Outer Hebrides many people mentioned venues as generally being of good quality and availability, and there was some awareness (and resulting concern) of how much European funding has contributed to this situation (although the Heritage Lottery Fund was mentioned a few times too). Community land ownership has been enormously valuable in enabling local people to manage activity in their area, and community-focussed income from windfarms was also valued.

[Open Conversation, Outer Hebrides (Lewis and the Uists), December 2017]



Picture of Bridgend Farmhouse building up a community space with and for a diverse local community group, in the highest ranking area on the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation.

Threats to Requisite 1: Space

"Space was mentioned by a few groups, in terms of needing better access to affordable, reliable and appropriate space - both to meet as groups and to talk to and share ideas with other like-minded groups. Some groups highlighted the potential and possibilities for community-led groups to take over and use vacant shops on the high street. Where this had been enabled, groups reported very positive ecosystems of local activity emerging."

[Perth Open Conversation, November 2017]

The Open Conversation in Perth is just one example of how access to space is a crucial yet flexible requirement, that faces a real threat when property ownership and management does not take communities' interests and needs into account. This includes lack of availability, as well as the way that power-dynamics and access restrictions can affect a community's comfort and use.

Potential threats identified during the Open Conversations include:

- Cuts to public funding resulting in more restrictive management and the closure of public buildings
- Commercial hire (of both public and private spaces) exceeding the budget of many groups
- Formal arts venues offering mainly curated engagement activities for the public
- Absent landlords making unoccupied, vacant spaces a challenge rather than an opportunity for community use.

Examples of these came up in a significant proportion of the conversations, particularly those that did not bring together an existing group in their regular space. In Scotland we ran an online consultation alongside the Open Conversations (which was open from 25 September to 13 November 2017). We asked respondents what one change would make their creative activity brighter and many of the responses identified venues and space to work as a key factor:

- "The arts gallery in our local theatre has closed. Many art groups including ours had week-long exhibitions in there. Now there is nowhere in town for this and we are forced to find a village hall for a weekend. This used to be our main fundraiser for the group. So a gallery in town would make the future of many arts groups in town brighter."
- "Our building is an old mill with many levels: making it more accessible would be great."

- "Arts organisations' building needs [should be] embedded in spatial planning."
- "[What would help is] National Trust allowing groups to perform for free without public liability insurance."
- "[What would help is a] guaranteed venue. We have to negotiate with the church, whose activities take precedence over our meetings."

The Open Conversation in Perth mentioned "unrealistically high rents (even where premises were otherwise sitting empty) or simply being unable to find out who had the power to grant them access."

This is a challenge that affects some communities more than others. In Blackpool, the Open Conversation in November 2018 was hosted at Revoe Community Centre off Central Drive, a corridor of historical significance within Blackpool, but also subject to long-term under-investment and a transient population. The group reflected upon its character and history as a coastal town, which has defined the natural and built environment, as well as the area's economy and communities, built around a long history of tourism, dating from and shaped by Victorian domestic holidays.

Tourism is a major source of income and employment, and gives the town a distinct character and a high level of arts and entertainment for a town of Blackpool's size. However seasonal tourism also creates population fluctuations and an environment shaped by the needs and expectations of these groups and the commercial interests of service providers, at odds with the needs of the local community and longer-term development and sustainability of the cultural commons. The Central Drive 'corridor' is an example of this, a significant route into the town centre, running parallel to the seafront and promenade between the south and central piers. Once a busy shopping street, many of the commercial units are vacant or occupied by temporary discount stores. The conversation touched upon the issue of non-domicile landlords as well as the impact of the expected super casino development (dropped in 2007) which would have resulted in the demolition of much of the existing street and influenced the departure of many of the existing businesses.

The continuous decline of local authority funding has led to a void in supporting and elevating local culture and the long established relationships that local arts officers would have nurtured and developed with local artists and groups. Libraries and churches are key creative spaces where poor communities are not priced out of engagement. Using the arts to build tourism and therefore income generation is for some the only validity of the arts and even then the engagement is top down rather than a cooperative compact.

EXAMPLE: OPEN CONVERSATION, OUTER HEBRIDES, DECEMBER 2017

The role of the Local Authority Arts Officer has been reduced to part time, which has impacted on their ability to bring groups together for networking events. There are obvious and inevitable challenges of geography in the Outer Hebrides, which can mean that getting together for peer learning, planning and training can be difficult, especially without financial support. The Local Authority's small grants programme has also "all-but disappeared", and although funding has been maintained for some core activity, this has particularly impacted on community-led groups, who had previously used small grants for costs such as the hire of professional tutors and travel to events on the mainland (this is quite a significant extra cost compared to mainland groups). Some groups (eg pipe bands, Gaelic choirs etc) thrive from going to competitions and events on the mainland, so lack of funding to support this can have a really significant impact on their activity.

The lack of reliable, fast and affordable internet connections restricted both the type of creative activity (anything requiring internet connection was essentially impossible in some areas), and was a challenge for groups hoping to raise their profile, look for new members, and share and find inspiration.

There was a wide concern about the likely loss of European funds, which have been important to some groups. Questions were also raised about the possibility of Brexit creating new restrictions on volunteers who were living in the Outer Hebrides on non-working visas, which would heavily impact many volunteer-led groups.

There was a desire for funding and support to recognise (and work with) this specific context of remote and rural communities. Whilst local ownership and community land trusts were celebrated as really driving local activity forward, there was also a concern that they can push groups / areas into competition with one another, and can entrench boundaries between areas that would otherwise be better placed to work collaboratively.

In contrast to the generally positive stories about venues, one person passionately noted an ongoing struggle to access affordable space. This highlighted that with such a dispersed population and travel / transport challenges, there is a need for well dispersed, highly local provision, which can require more investment than in urban areas where people are typically more able to travel to a neighbouring venue.

Both public and private sector are required to provide the diverse spaces across which creative cultural activity can take seed and thrive. In Perth, the challenge of getting 'face to face time' with local decision-makers was mentioned by a few groups. They were simply unaware of what they could do, or who could help them. Some perceived this as inertia and a negative attitude, or a consequence of the 'facelessness' of local authorities, whilst others considered it a more ominous attempt to withhold power from local people: "Local councils should begin to trust the communities they serve and make things easier!"

This group also discussed the role of Community Asset Transfers, but felt that too often spaces were only made available "after many years of neglect and underinvestment, dramatically limiting their use to community groups": "They're not assets by now, they've been neglected for so long they've become a liability." [Perth Open Conversation, November 2017]



EXAMPLE: GROUP OPEN CONVERSATION IN CUMNOCK, EAST AYRSHIRE, OCTOBER 2017

Cumnock Area Musical Production Society (CAMPS) were the first asset transfer in East Ayrshire, and took over the old council offices (and former school) at the Barrhill Centre. This move has created a thriving ecosystem of organisations using this space, accessing affordable lets and hires to some 40+ community groups. It's become a community hub - a great example of how to solve space issues by creating your own - and in doing so creating usable, practical space for other community-led groups.

Many groups talked about the positive impact that thriving community groups had in supporting and nurturing other such groups - a multiplier effect. One group secured funding for an administrative role, and designed into that role that the post-holder would spend time helping other local community groups apply for funding - sharing her time and expertise to support the whole community ecosystem. Other groups talked of not applying for local funds if they knew of other groups who were 'more deserving'. This wider awareness of the full local picture is a dramatically different story to perceptions of organisations competing for funds, chasing funding etc.

A number of groups praised the role of responsive local funders, who appreciate the local value of community groups and understand the distinctive local picture. They are administratively light and sensible about cashflow to recognise the capacity of community groups. Some local funders pay invoices direct for items they are funding (avoiding the need for groups even to have access to a bank account).

A number of groups talked about the challenges of working with local authorities and local leisure trusts (who manage creative community assets). They spoke of community-led feasibility studies being ignored and local expertise being pushed out - "we went from partners to users", resulting in local developments that were felt to be unhelpful to existing and aspiring community-led activity. There were further discussions around the attitude and approach of the local authority - "they're very slow... not so much hostile, just totally un-dynamic". This culture was felt to be at odds with, and a hindrance to, the dynamism of community-led creative activity.

Real challenges were discussed about accessing and using vacant properties on the high street. There is a perception that some of this is deliberate - "many are owned by pension companies and just left to crumble". There was a desire for large scale change to bring these buildings back into community / creative use. There were some examples of local action plans, town centre redevelopment plans etc being a helpful tool in these changes, although others highlighted that these plans only work effectively where they are genuinely community led.

There were challenges with funding, but with a specific flavour that went beyond a generic need for 'more money'. LEADER funding [a European Union initiative to support rural development projects initiated at the local level in order to revitalise rural areas and create jobs] is prioritising applications for local-level funding, and some groups had successfully secured support. However, LEADER's practice of paying in arrears (and typically being very slow to do so) is having huge implications for community groups. One group was waiting on very delayed payments for a large capital spend - they were fortunate to have reserves to cover this shortfall, but "it would have put some groups out of business". Delays in LEADER funds have effectively stalled the next innovation for that group.

There needs to be a requirement for funders who want to fund at community level to adapt their practices to reflect the needs of smaller and less formal organisations. Groups felt a need for advice, guidance and a framework for large-scale bodies who want to influence local activity to work responsibility in communities. There needs to be a mechanism for groups to address this huge power imbalance, and to highlight and challenge practices by funders. They are otherwise almost powerless in such situations, and feel very limited capacity to influence this situation.

A final discussion highlighted that - at the community level - people see creativity and creative cultural activity as being totally intertwined with priorities around volunteering and sport / exercise - people don't actually see them as separate from one another. It raised the question that if government sees separate sectors (and strategies) around volunteers / arts / sports / other, but people just see 'community', how can that work in practice?

REQUISITE 1

There was also recognition that - in some cases - activity is constrained by a fear (or a perception) of over-legislation, and that this might not always be the reality. There was a strong demand for a more proactive and positive approach to highlighting what is allowed (rather than what is not), and for local authorities and policy makers to “help us find ways to make things happen, rather than finding ways to stop them.” Equally, there is a need for support to identify and “call out” venues and bodies that ask for unnecessary or too onerous administration where this is not required. Groups lack the resources or knowledge to do this themselves so can find themselves at the mercy of unrealistic or unnecessary demands. “I wish for people who want to do things locally be be met with kindness, support and permission”. [Perth Open Conversation, November 2017]



Group picture of Coffee 'n' Laughs, a weekly friendship group in Newport, Wales, engages participants experiencing isolation and depression in creative activities.



Requisite 2 : Creative Citizens





Picture from Musicians in Exile, a community project for asylum seeking and refugee musicians formed by The Glasgow Barons, an orchestra for Govan.



REQUISITE 2

Voluntary arts activity relies on hosts, group leaders, tutors, facilitators: the 'creative citizens' who have the determination and resourcefulness to instigate and organise creative activity and involve others – finding a way to make things happen, often despite limited funding.

Those we spoke to ranged from unfunded, unconstituted groups to those linked to formal settings, such as charities and Community Interest Companies. Despite this range, the presence and scope of activities of these creative citizens were similar.

Creative citizens (the leaders of local creative cultural activity) are generally driven by their own passions and the desire to share these with others. This includes individuals initiating spontaneous creative activity to the organisation of planned creative gatherings. Examples ranged from the individual in Blackpool who changed the mood of the local street with a soundtrack and 'We love dancing, Come join us' placards, to create fleeting exchanges and mass dance events at festivals, to the choirs and crafters that meet regularly for decades and organisers of annual festivals and competitions that bring different community groups and organisations together. These people are vital and give communities hope, confidence and a collective sense of can do.

In Birkenhead, one woman sold her car to pay for the lease on a vacant space (formerly a school, judo club and church). The new community centre 'Building Bridges' was started by a local resident and mental health worker who moved to the area two years ago and had a vision to address social isolation by creating an inclusive space for the community, where the ability to connect ("have a chat") wasn't reliant "on how much you had in your pocket". There's a café, social supermarket and 'pay as you feel' shop, primarily with children's clothing. The building itself is being renovated through community volunteer work and artist commissions, including a mural planned for the brick exterior and renovation of the outdoor space into a garden (with plans to work with local school children to create a tyre garden). Dance classes and creative projects in the space reflect the local history and heritage (eg records left in the building about community members that had used the centre). [Open Conversation, Birkenhead, April 2019]

At the Open Conversation in Cumnock, East Ayrshire (October 2017) there was discussion of the traditional skills that still exist amongst older people and the importance of these activities in creating inter-generational links, and valuing the skills and contributions of older people. People also talked about creative community activity being "totally brilliant for unearthing creative talent".

EXAMPLE: GROUP OPEN CONVERSATION IN BALLYOGAN, DÚN LOAGHAIRE-RATHDOWN, FEBRUARY 2017

In February 2017, Voluntary Arts convened an Open Conversation towards understanding local cultural interest, activities and needs in Ballyogan in Dún Loaghaire-Rathdown. Ballyogan has one of the highest percentages in the Republic of Ireland of local authority housing, a traveller community and hosts a young population, unlike the rest of the Dún loaghaire-Rathdown Council area, which is the most affluent local authority area in the country (Pobal HP Deprivation Index, 2015). It is reported that there are high levels of anti-social behaviour in Ballyogan and there is low engagement within the community.

Those involved in the conversation were surprised and proud of the amount of creative and cultural activity that was already happening in Ballyogan. They identified an opportunity to harness the energy created in the room by starting several small, low investment projects to keep up momentum and grow a culture of collaboration among residents.

Since the meeting in February 2017, local people formed a group called #ballyogancreative. They meet on Mondays in the Samuel Beckett Civic to discuss and initiate creative activity in Ballyogan. There are different interests and levels of experiences, from the local artist to amateur artist and the person who wants to dip their toes in the water and experiment. These creative citizens communicate regularly on their Facebook group called #ballyogancreative which currently has 69 members and is growing every week.

Threats to Requisite 2: Creative Citizens

Like the need for some form of space, the motivation and ability of community members to instigate and maintain activity is vital, and while a wide range of individuals play this role to create a plethora of varied opportunities across diverse communities, this work is reliant on some resource and support. With the necessary input from either public agencies or private individuals, activity can be developed and embedded within the local civic sphere, yet without this, the initial energy and enthusiasm of these catalysts can be exhausted. The 'closed loop' of continually regenerating activity is part of a larger ecology of both economic resources and social connections. Our Open Conversations highlighted many beneficial outcomes (detailed below), but also highlighted some of the growing challenges that make it harder for some creative citizens and communities to flourish.



EXAMPLE: GROUP OPEN CONVERSATION IN EDINBURGH, OCTOBER 2017

There was a strong theme that some people and organisation's voices get heard most by policy-makers, leading to a culture that prioritises and supports those who are best resourced. Participants felt there should be an ongoing and concerted effort to identify whose voices are missing from policy-level discussions. There was uncertainty about how community groups might get to influence and set the agenda long term - with funders, councils, government. There was a demand for "more ways in". Savvier groups might be able to find 'influencers', but the hardest to hear voices are increasingly marginalised. This includes those who are brilliant at what they do, but lack time and the 'professional' skills to navigate seemingly-impenetrable organisations such as local authorities, funders and government. The role of Cultural Co-ordinators / Arts Officers was much-missed.

There was a demand for spaces for artists, communities and decision-makers to meet and share: face-to-face matchmaking. "Take the bureaucracy out of relationships, and restore balance of power in favour of those on the ground / with less resources." Groups wanted to develop the ability to connect with better resourced organisations: schools were recognised as enormously secure / well resourced compared to community groups. But the onus seems to be on community groups to do all of the 'relationship building' legwork: schools appear overstretched and unable to connect outwards.

The value of very local funds such as Edinburgh Neighbourhood Partnerships was praised. There is a need for low-admin, accessible grant schemes that operate locally and therefore understand local context. There was concern that money to fund Participatory Budgeting in Edinburgh is being taken from existing budgets - often from the smallest organisations. "It becomes a popularity vote": those organisations with the biggest reach "bus in" their supporters, and the 'sexiest' causes get chosen. However, Participatory Budgeting was praised by others, who felt that young people make savvy, educated decisions about what matters in their community if you speak to them in a way that engages them.

Groups recognised the importance of embracing digital developments, but highlighted that at a community level many people still aren't online. There is a risk that by embracing digital we create a greater divide between those who are online and those who aren't.

Requisite 3 : Recognition





Picture of the Coventry-based Sahyadri Friends Group involving a diverse mix of about 250 Indian families, all passionate about celebrating their differences and diversities.



REQUISITE 3

The idea of 'recognition,' reflected a need to feel valued. While none of the attendees at the Open Conversations were driven by a need for acclaim, the local connections and links that grew through creative collaboration were cited by many as a motivating factor for this activity, while a lack of wider recognition, while not directly preventing this activity, could devalue it and diminish the scope of this localised activity.

Examples of the crucial sense of recognition that came through connecting creatively, not only with other local people but those that share similar interests further afield and the wider population, arose in the Open Conversations across the nations.

In Perth (November 2017) people said that participation in their groups made them feel happy, energised, part of something, feel a sense of community, inspired, connected and normal. They also said that leading their groups came with feelings of being exhausted and frustrated. Participants spoke about the value of community-led activity in creating welcoming spaces for everyone: "You are allowed to play and be silly and you are still welcome. We like you whether you are successful or not".

This fine balance between feeling nurtured or exhausted reflects the need for recognition, as well as spaces and resources available. Where recognition exists, there were examples of communities taking creative ownership of disused sites and turning these vacant spaces into places of possibility, play, growth and learning, repurposing things that seem redundant and giving them new life. The creative opportunities highlighted in Birkenhead included applied traditional crafts such as green woodwork to creative re-use and recycling of waste, such as an eco-brick sculpture project in the park. [Community Connectors door knock with Involve NW team, April 2019]

From the community processions in Blackpool to the work of community groups such as Inspire Women's Centre, Oldham, the emphasis was local need rather than kudos. Deriving meaning and purpose, sharing space and practices. These Open Conversations indicated how community recognition of these activities allowed them to grow. The centre was set up as a twelve week pilot project with five participants and over the course of seven years, this growing group became the volunteers of a small centre, that grew to a multi-room space open three mornings a week. Their creative ethos is a fundamental characteristic: "Generic health services are often designed for fixed twelve week treatments and have long waiting times – this isn't closed, there's the potential for it to grow and change".

Those involved in this “platform for thriving” spoke passionately about the activities at the centre and the skills, interests and enthusiasm of those involved, bringing creative and artistic talents to lead sessions, as well as gifting paintings, clocks and other hand made decorations to personalise the space. The links that institutions such as HOME in Manchester have made with the group were also cited as being a valuable way to showcase Inspire work, with travel and ticket deals ‘widening horizons’ and enabling family and friends to get involved and excited. [Open Conversation, Oldham, February 2019]



Picture from Inspire Women, an Oldham-based group of women creating a tapestry of the interwoven lives and experiences.

Threats to Requisite 3: Recognition

Despite local recognition helping creative cultural activity to thrive, there was the sense across many of the Open Conversations that voluntary arts activity is undervalued at a national level.

Our online consultation in Scotland received several comments about perceptions and preconceptions about particular artforms (or volunteer-led activity in general) being detrimental to their work. We asked respondents what one change would make their creative activity brighter:

- "For Quilting to be recognized as an art form not as just a hobby (therefore not to be taken seriously)"
- "Getting recognition as an art form, not to be seen as something your granny does"
- "Public acknowledgment that stitched textile pieces are art"
- "Recognition of the skill and time taken for handcrafted items over cheap imports"
- "Stop calling it 'art' when men do it & only craft when women do it!!!!"
- "Better recognition from authorities that small organisations do not work magic with small pots, they put in hours of in kind time to make things happen and work."

In the Open Conversation in Perth in November 2017 participants commented on the lack of understanding for how activity "on the ground" is understood, and felt that the challenges they face were not understood by policy makers. This was especially felt in relation to the impact of regulation, legislation and health and safety, where participants felt the impact of a mindset that was perceived to be overly-cautious and risk averse. Examples cited included the use of facilities in community centres ('sometimes only named staff are allowed to use the kitchen'), and requests for detailed risk assessments for very 'everyday' community activity. This sort of over-regulation can make it difficult for informal activity to exist, and risks turning people into 'organisers' and 'service users', rather than members of a community. Participants commented on the need for a 'power shift' from policy-makers to those who deliver local activity ('they're supposed to work for us, aren't they?').





Benefits

One of the most common themes from the conversations was about the many and varied benefits of regular participation in creative activity. Participants talked about the need for some form of creative expression in their lives; personal enrichment; the benefits to their mental wellbeing or physical health; spending time with others; making new friends; learning new skills; having respite from caring responsibilities; or simply enjoying salutary time to themselves.

Benefit 1 : Social connectedness and community identity





Picture from the one of the large community events of the Sahyadri Friends Group in Coventry.



BENEFIT 1

For most participants in voluntary creative and cultural groups, the strongest motivator for wanting to take part was the social element of coming together with others in a shared creative purpose. And from this collective endeavour, voluntary arts activity creates a sense of ownership and breeds a determination to keep going: people will “walk through walls” for their voluntary arts activity.

It was clear throughout our series of Open Conversations that we weren’t discussing mere hobbies, pastimes or passing interests. These were passions, convictions, defining parts of people’s lives. Their creative activities were vitally important, and participants would find a way to pursue them with or without support or subsidy.

Funding was inevitably the most common challenge cited by participants and group leaders. Paying for materials, hiring space, remuneration for expenses and so on is a perennial problem. But two strong themes emerge here: first, that voluntary activity, energy and goodwill goes a very long way in making things happen, and many activities only require very small amounts of funding. The availability of micro-grants of a few hundred pounds, with a proportionately light-touch application and monitoring process, would make a considerable difference to these groups.

Secondly, with or without public funds, the overwhelming message was “We’d find a way to make it happen.” People take part for the love of the artform, and creative practitioners are incredibly resourceful.

It is interesting to reflect on the public/private nature of voluntary arts activity, which usually consists of private groups of friends who become part of the civic life of their community and a symbol of its culture.

The most common weakness of voluntary arts groups is that most groups feel disconnected, undervalued, ignored.

There were also some fascinating insights from our Open Conversations into how communities are seen from the outside versus how they really are.

In some areas, for example Ceredigion in Wales, regular and visible cultural activities such as festivals within a community centre have been shown to improve community spirit and pride, and even make the area more desirable for potential residents. And in Mid & East Antrim in Northern Ireland, it was felt that creativity can help restore the image of Larne town.

EXAMPLE: GROUP OPEN CONVERSATION IN CUMNOCK, EAST AYRSHIRE, OCTOBER 2017

Cumnock has a long heritage in fabrics and textile manufacture, and people talked about the role of creativity in retaining and celebrating that heritage, as well as bringing purpose and pride to an area that has experienced struggles in a post-industrial society:

“After industry left Cumnock the town was in the doldrums. It’s making a resurgence now in people having a wee bit of pride in the place... I’m not saying [our group] has done all that, but it’s helping.”

Voluntary-run creative groups have also created local routes into professional arts, thanks to young people being exposed to a wider range of aspirations, talent development opportunities, and the chance to develop technical theatre skills like lighting and set building. People talked about the impact on their (and others’) confidence, bringing people together from different backgrounds, and voluntary arts groups’ role in nurturing and supporting people to develop and grow (“one person went from painting scenery, to the back row of the chorus, to the lead in Calamity Jane!”).

A volunteer-run craft shop was providing an outlet for creative people to test demand, raise their profile etc (before going on to sell their work commercially).

Some local groups worked significantly with volunteers who were older, or who were overcoming addictions, and so provided a much wider community impact in supporting these people to (re)integrate into society.

BENEFIT 1

Our online consultation in Scotland found that a sense of being part of a community and a place was an important factor:

- “Being aware of and engaged with the society within which I live, ability to actively react to current socio-cultural context”
- “It leads to my engagement in other local activities and use of local businesses”
- “Reducing my isolation in the community, learning new skills and passing on my skills and most of all having great fun.”

At our Open Conversation at Revoe, Blackpool, in November 2018, there was discussion about the differing perceptions of Blackpool and its culture within and outside the town. This ranged from more exclusively positive or negative to mixed and/or conflicted views from the group and perceived within some members of the town's institutions, such as the council and university.

The heritage of the town, its architecture, attractions and stories of the menagerie of circus animals being taken for walks along the beach, still recollected by the 'donkey-men' who work on the seafront, held nostalgic sentiment and local significance for some, while others dismissed these as less meaningful and relevant.

There were conversations about the diversity of the area and talents of the local community, which was seen to offer a huge amount of potential to be celebrated, but could be neglected in the widely marketed image of the town.

[This Open Conversation was hosted by Revoelution (supported by Local Trust's, Big Local investment), with Ibbison estate and community centre and those taking part in the conversation included local residents, partners and creative practitioners.]



EXAMPLE: GROUP OPEN CONVERSATIONS IN MID & EAST ANTRIM, OCTOBER 2017

Voluntary Arts ran a series of Open Conversations on local creative activity in the urban centres of Mid & East Antrim: Ballymena, Larne and Carrickfergus during October 2017. The conversations marked the beginning of a new cultural programme called 'Opening Doors', the starting intention being to gain a better understanding of the cultural interests, activities and needs of the local community to enable the local council to work in partnership with existing groups in growing and sustaining the creative and cultural infrastructure. Local arts and community activists were invited to participate in these Open Conversations to share their thoughts and ideas on how they would like to see creativity developed across Mid & East Antrim.

Communication was cited as a key issue: this included intergroup communication as well as being able to communicate effectively with audiences and potential partners. In each area creative and cultural activity was seen as a powerful tool for improving the district's image and reputation. Access and availability to the existing infrastructure in the area was identified as a barrier for some. Each area liked the idea of a central arts hub that would be flexible and multi-functional for a range of activities. There was support for the idea of a locally led creative network, particularly if an enabling body such as Mid & East Antrim Council or Voluntary Arts could assist or facilitate the process of bringing groups together. It was identified that development of more creative and cultural activity relies on people working together and there is much opportunity to harness the energy and connections made.



EXAMPLE: OPEN CONVERSATION, OUTER HEBRIDES, DECEMBER 2017

In December 2017 Voluntary Arts held an Open Conversation in the Outer Hebrides (Lewis and the Uists). Intergenerational activity was really valued and very popular, as part of bringing the community together, and sharing and passing on skills:

"Intergenerational work is important to people in the Uists. The sense of heritage, belonging, community and rootedness is strong, so older people feel a duty to pass that along... culture is an intrinsic part of that"

Some people spoke about the value (especially for young people) in learning lessons for life through participating in creative groups – skills like time management, responsibility, others in the group relying on you, getting on with everyone, being responsible for each other. These were never a formally articulated aim of participation, but participants recognised how some individuals had significantly developed their skills over time.

The impact of (and interconnectedness of) creative activity to wider society was discussed, such as its role in supporting people with dementia, in intergenerational priorities, education, social care. There was consensus that Gaelic is very much a living part of the culture in the Hebrides – and part of the future (not just the past). This is partly because Gaelic has retained its investment (for example in funding for education), and this has been reflected in a positive impact on the vibrancy and pride in Gaelic culture (including amongst young people). This was echoed in a general appreciation and understanding of the value of arts and culture amongst the general public. In a local authority consultation local people had voted not to make cuts to arts provision and funding, illustrating how valued cultural activity is.

There was a celebration of the link between culture and the natural environment of the Outer Hebrides - a recognition that both are an integral part of life. The social element of cultural participation was felt to be important - in towns where everyone knows everyone, there is good connectivity between different activities, and community-led activity is popular and tends to be highly responsive to local demand. Venues tend to be used for multiple activities, which have a positive impact in breaking down barriers to creative activities and building awareness of creative provision with potential new audiences.

'Consultation' with 'participants' and 'audiences' happens very organically and as an everyday part of life (eg one group talked about making programming decisions by chatting to people in the local shop - where one of the committee worked).

On logistical challenges, there was discussion about the deeply religious Christian ethos of some parts of the island. Whilst there was a wide recognition that "you live here and chose to respect that", there was also frustration expressed by groups who were trying to pursue less traditional artforms or explore more modern ideas. There was frustration that power in the community was held by a relatively small number of people who were perceived to hold the most conservative views, and that this has a very real impact on what creative activity can be explored, when, and with what level of scrutiny. People largely were respectful of the traditions and religion of the islands, but there was a desire to see the wider diversity of views of the population reflected by those in power. There was also frustration that 'centralised' (ie Scotland-wide) funding decisions failed to take account of the religious ethos of some of the island communities. The collection of diversity and monitoring data was a real and live issue here: people understood why such data was being requested but simply felt unable to ask for it - and that doing so would question the ongoing viability of the group itself: 'if we asked about their sexual orientation they'd just never come back... it'd put us out of business'. "We are reliant on the expertise and energy of a few key people - that's true everywhere, but it's more of a risk when people are so dispersed."

There's real desire (and demand) for creative activity for particular needs and niches of the population - such as subtitled films for deaf and hard of hearing audiences. But the tiny numbers of people involved mean this sort of activity will never break even on a commercial basis, and it's hard to secure funding to serve such a tiny population ('funding's a numbers game, and we just don't have the numbers'). There's a risk, therefore, that for any activity to be viable it needs to be as 'mainstream' as possible. Equally, it's hard to take a risk on new kinds of creative provision when the small pool of people who could access them means it's very easy for attendance to be tiny.

Finally, one person voiced a frustration of their perception that Creative Scotland have a "lack of understanding that professional art can be made north of Dundee", and at a perceived lack of representation of rural and Highland communities in Creative Scotland's decision making processes. There was a desire to make, see and celebrate work that was specifically local (and not simply 'Scottish'):

"What would happen if we prioritised local stories and local interests - [we should be asking] 'how can we best support the people in this area to create and tell the stories that matter the most to them?'".

Benefit 2 :

Fun and enjoyment -

“My time”





Picture from the Grand Northern Ukulele Festival in Huddersfield, England, which aims to inspire folks to have a great time while connecting with other people.



BENEFIT 2

One of the primary reasons for taking part, so self-evident that is often assumed or even overlooked, is that practicing creative activity with others is fun. Participants take part because it is enjoyable and uplifting. For most participants, the two hours they spend every week singing in their choir, or playing their musical instrument, or crafting in a group, is time for them: time away from work responsibilities, from family responsibilities, from caring responsibilities. Unlike the hours spent passively consuming digital content or scrolling through social media, time with others on a creative activity is meaningfully spent.

The set up for many groups followed a similar pattern: arrival, chatting and catching up, a cup of tea, finding your place, and then immersing yourself in absorbing activity. Indeed the pattern was so similar across so many groups, that we might consider that routine – even ritual – is conducive to a meaningful creative experience. Participants in visual arts and crafts in particular talked about the comfortable silence that falls when participants are united in a collective creative endeavour, where people are at ease with themselves and each other without the need for conversation.

At the Open Conversation in Edinburgh, in October 2017, we asked attendees how being involved in their group made them feel:



Our online consultation in Scotland asked 'What do you get out of participating?':



- "Singing with my choir leaves me feeling buoyant and relaxed. I have also met some fabulous people and I know I could call on many of them in a time of crisis - as they could with me."

Many respondents to the online consultation mentioned how nourishing it is to have 'time out' to focus on a creative activity:

- "Time for me. Creative space for concentration on music and singing, working together with others I don't usually socialise with."
- "Gives me huge sense of wellbeing ... it's my food for my soul!"
- "The activities themselves (drawing, craft etc) give us some 'time out' from the busyness around us. Quite meditative!"
- "Contact with other quilters and embroiderers. It's time out from my busy and stressful job as a teacher. It's also therapy and keeps me sane, stops me dwelling on a health condition I have."

BENEFIT 2

Many people also mentioned the enrichment and value that being part of a creative group brings to their life:

- "I know I always feel better about my life when there's creative activity in it. That activity may require hard work, a bit of a struggle - but it's always fulfilling to grapple with creative challenges - even if the end result isn't everything you dream it might be!"
- "Acting on your own creativity is a source of a particularly special type of energy"

The idea of "My time" may point to a reason why many adults who used to take part in creative activity no longer do so: they don't give themselves permission, or are not given permission, to take some time to pursue a creative interest for themselves. There are complex reasons for this, involving prevailing social





Picture from the Care for Creation project run by Ballymena Church Members Forum, in Northern Ireland.



Benefit 3 : Health and Wellbeing





BENEFIT 3

A huge number of people referenced health - using creativity to either maintain their wellbeing or as part of their recovery or coping with health conditions. Group leaders in particular referenced the positive contribution that regular participation in creative activity can have on participants' health and wider wellbeing. Although voluntary arts activities aren't usually evaluated according to health measures, and participants don't necessarily talk in clinical terms, the anecdotal evidence and testimonials presented were strong. People talked about 'reducing their stress levels,' 'lifting their mood,' finding the activity 'therapeutic and relaxing,' and giving them 'a new purpose.'

The research on the benefits of arts participation to physical and mental health is now extensive, and it seems clear that alongside professionally-led, publicly-commissioned arts and health activities, there is a huge resource of grassroots arts groups right across the country with an important contribution to make to maintaining individual and community health.



Picture from The Joy of Sound, a volunteer-led group providing inclusive participatory music and arts activities for people of all ages and backgrounds.

EXAMPLE: AIMEE'S FRIDAY ART GROUP, WALES

The group was established to fill a need for low-cost art classes in Prestatyn in North Wales. The group's aim is to bring people together, share ideas and techniques, socialise, make arts and crafts, have fun and enhance participants' lives through art. Taking an imaginative approach to creativity, the group offers a wide range of visual arts and crafts activities.

Since its inception the group has grown to over 45 active members. This is a truly grassroots initiative, rather than a commissioned arts and health project, but roughly a third of participants have been referred by GPs or Occupational Therapists. Commenting on the success of the group, an NHS Occupational Therapist said, "We often don't see people again who have started attending; this is perhaps the best feedback there is."

Our online consultation asked "why do you want to be involved?":

- "Get out more, meet people and become more creative after my strokes"
- "Developing and sharing my art practice helps me to overcome lifelong chronic health conditions: I'd love to encourage others to do the same"
- "I am disabled, wheelchair bound and unable to leave my home unaided. To be able to escape to a group that shares my interests would help alleviate the boredom, isolation and depression."
- "Be able to live a lifestyle better for my mental health, eg work/life balance."

Many responses related to the sense of community, company and connectedness that was a driver for their involvement in creative groups:

- "I'd like to work with those with similar passions. This would help widen my connections and help with my own social isolation."
- "Mixing with like minded people, adding value and interest to my life "
- "It would be confidence building, reduce isolation"
- "I want to help others and that will help me to live a fulfilled life. I will get pleasure from making others happy and knowing that I'm making their lives better."

EXAMPLE: HIMS AND ARIAS CHOIR, WALES

Describing themselves as ‘an amateur choir but professionally led’, Hims & Arias is a male voice choir based in Rhondda Cynon Taff in South Wales. The choir performs regularly at residential homes and raises money for charities. It is organised by a committee of choir members. Hims & Arias recently finished fifth in the Cornwall International Male Voice Festival, competing against much larger choirs. The weekly rehearsals provide an hour and a half of fun, engagement and mutual support, and the choir has been a lifeline for new members following bereavement, depression or illness.

Our Open Conversations at the Building Bridges community centre in Birkenhead in April 2019 provided the following feedback:

- Particular emphasis on the informality, ease and openness of the space
- Value of ‘multi-use’ space, that was about the connections rather than more formal pre-determined programming, but the offer of both – particularly practical skills, courses and advice within a community rather than ‘official’ space
- Seeing ‘individuals’ within the community and the space rather than limiting their role to what’s on offer
- Several people emphasised the immense potential within the community, that these spaces offered support and solace to those with significant barriers to overcome (personal issues raised included ill health, serious financial issues and family suicide) but demonstrated the contribution that they could still offer both during and following these challenges. An example of a local retiree (ex para-trooper) who had felt adrift before becoming one of the most active volunteers in the centre’s renovation due to an array of skills (he built yachts formerly).
- The DIY, learn-as-you-go and goodwill orientation of the space, as well as the familiarity of local residents with its former uses, were all key in the sense of shared ownership.

The voluntary arts are more inclusive, more porous. This can include pastimes that don’t fall into specific art-form categories, alongside those that do. Arts activities are also widely used by other kinds of groups in all communities for the unique benefits that they offer. These activities exist alongside the community centres and arts centres that offer more formal art-form focussed sessions.

The inclusion of “arts in the broadest sense” in the Inspire Women’s Centre in Oldham was described as “changing the energy”. A lot of sadness can be released and felt in the space, creativity as well as meditation and relaxation balance and shift back, “taking everyone into a different space” – crying with laughter instead.

Some people talked about the importance of being part of something together:

- “Maybe because others are there’s the confidence to try, to join in”
- “Coming together and creating and being visible” (Catwalk Divas – Designing t-shirts and staging the show. Some spoke as well as showing the words and images on their shirts. Others watching wanted to speak too, inspired by the show.)

Creative writing, poetry and drama: “Start the journey and join in” - “Using and expressing outside”.

Other comments made about this approach included “bad luck turning good”, whether coming to a personal creative practice such as sketching due to circumstances like unemployment and finding confidence and new skills, or connecting to others, working on something together while talking:

- “Creating a space that’s conducive to personal creativity”
- “Moving from struggling to sharing’ and from ‘Can’t and why?’ – to – ‘Can and why not?’”

[Open Conversation with Inspire Women’s Centre, Oldham, February 2019]



Conclusions

The programme of 'Open Conversations' undertaken by Voluntary Arts from 2017-19 across the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland represents a major exploration of local creative cultural activity.

Across the UK and Ireland millions of people regularly take part in grassroots everyday creativity, usually organised by volunteers without any direct public funding. This encompasses everything from traditional amateur arts and crafts (singing, dancing, drama, quilting, painting, writing etc) to digital arts and creative cookery and gardening – from knitting a jumper to playing the guitar, making a short film to arranging flowers – from self-governed constituted amateur arts groups to informal get-togethers and individual everyday creativity – from the 'serious amateur' to the occasional participant.

CONCLUSIONS

There are approximately 63,000 constituted voluntary arts groups in the UK and Ireland, regularly involving more than 10 million people. These groups represent the broad engagement of people in the creative lives of their communities on their own terms. It is clear taking part in creative activities is vitally important for individuals and communities, and the fact that so many people have, for so many years, chosen to spend their time undertaking creative cultural activity means that it is self-evidently valuable.

Our programme of Open Conversations highlighted the incredible variety and range of voluntary arts activity, and the particular local nature of creative cultural activity in the communities we visited. Although we found some areas where there was a lack of groups practicing certain artforms, there were voluntary arts groups of some description in every community. The type and scale of creative cultural activity was influenced by each area's heritage, population size and dispersal, socio-economic conditions and the unique opportunities and challenges offered by the physical spaces or the skills and interests local community members share. In particular, there are economic factors that affect the extent to which people have the time to engage with creative cultural activity. But our research also found some clear commonalities that appear to hold true across all types of community.

We identified three overarching benefits that arise from taking part in creative cultural activity:

- social connectedness and community identity
- fun and enjoyment - "My time"
- positive impacts on participants' health and wellbeing

We also categorised three requisites for local creative cultural activity:

- space
- creative citizens
- recognition

Our Open Conversations revealed ways in which each of these three requisites is currently under threat.

Cuts to public funding are leading to more restrictive management and the closure of public buildings while commercial hire costs (of both public and private spaces) are exceeding the budget of many groups.

The inspirational volunteers on whom most local creative cultural activity depends are expressing an increasing frustration about the difficulties of connecting with policymakers and statutory agencies. There is a growing sense that the voluntary arts are ignored and isolated.

Most of the people we talked to felt that voluntary arts activity is undervalued at a national level, particularly in relation to its significant positive contribution to health and wellbeing.

The evidence we gathered through this extensive national programme of consultation with the volunteer organisers of local creative cultural activity points to the need for three key actions to address these current threats.

Voluntary Arts has already started to address these threats. We have adopted the recommendations that arose from these conversations as the basis for the priorities in our new Strategic Framework, which guides all our activities across the UK and Ireland. But we recognise that it will take a vibrant movement of partners to deliver on these ambitions.

We ask our partners in funding, policy making and representation – government bodies, universities and cultural support organisations – to join us in a commitment to help deliver these actions, and rewild the cultural landscape. We call this our **Common Ground Pact**.



The Common Ground Pact





1. We pledge to open up more public spaces for creative cultural activity

For community cultural activities the funding landscape looks increasingly bleak. Reduced state funding, the move from grants to contracts and an increasing focus on project funding looks unlikely to be reversed. This is the new normal. But it is possible to find some ways of responding constructively to these many challenges by working with others to protect and promote civic spaces (arts venues, community centres, parks, libraries) for creative activity. We need to be sharing examples of innovative use of public spaces for creative cultural activity, and brokering relationships between the people who need a place to be creative with those who own/run them. We need to ensure that available space is well-used and people looking for a suitable place to be creative feel connected and informed.

The garden needs untended areas where new things can grow.

2. We pledge to build strong connections and relationships to support participation in creative cultural activity

We need to develop a movement across the UK and Ireland, in which people, groups, organisations and networks involved in everyday creativity come together, along with government and policy-makers, private sector and academia, to connect, share and learn from one another. The disconnection and isolation of voluntary arts groups should be addressed through the creation of a variety of local, regional and national self-sustaining networks, across communities of place and interest, to develop a more mutually-supportive environment for creative cultural activity.

We need paths through the garden to enable us to reach all parts of it.

3. We pledge to demonstrate how taking part in creative cultural activity improves social connectedness

We need to develop projects and gather evidence to show that regular creative practice with others can reduce loneliness and isolation. We should share case studies and research to convince the general public that taking part in creative cultural activity can decrease loneliness and increase wellbeing - helping to persuade more people to move from passive consumption to active participation in culture.

For the garden to flourish across all terrains everyone needs to tend it together, nourishing the garden and ourselves.

Our cultural life – first and last – is local. Local creative cultural activity is our common ground, increasingly important to our quality of life, self-expression, socialisation, health and wellbeing. In an atmosphere of divisive political opinion, with society fractured by social media commentary, a few hours of immersive creative activity, shared with others in a social gathering in real life, can provide a beneficial corrective. Voluntary arts activity is resilient, determined and immensely valuable but currently faces a range of challenges and threats. To enable creative cultural activity to continue to thrive we need to better appreciate the role that grassroots everyday creativity plays in our culture and society. We need to reconnect the disparate parts of our cultural ecosystem – rewilding the garden.



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Written by Gareth Coles, Claire Sharples and Robin Simpson.

Illustrations by Hollie Leddy-Flood (www.holl.ie)

Design and layout by Fiona Daly and Andreea Lupu

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