

# CREATIVE LIVES REPORT

Creative Assemblies Aug/Sept 2022

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## Overview

Across late August and September 2022, Creative Lives organised three Creative Assemblies. Designed as informal, friendly spaces, these events sought to find out from the people engaged and active in the arts what is working well and what the challenges are for volunteer and community led arts activity in their region.

The three areas, North Ayrshire, Scottish Borders and Aberdeenshire were identified as places where Creative Lives had less connections than other areas of Scotland, so particularly wanted to gather volunteer/community led arts projects together to find out what might be particular to their region and what might be the shared themes, post lockdown, across all areas.

This report, pulls together the feedback from all three Creative Assemblies, highlighting shared areas of concern or celebration as well as specific issues to each local authority.

This piece of work has been undertaken by Sarah Longfield, a Glasgow based arts consultant, facilitator and creative business & life coach, who has extensive experience in producing participatory arts projects and working with volunteers.

## Where did they happen?

Having had an absence of heart-led meaningful face to face connection over the past couple of years, the opportunity to meet up, network and share was welcomed by all participants. For some, this was their first networking event since COVID hit. With the importance of this in mind, the selection of venue and refreshments was given careful consideration.

Our assemblies took place at:

- ❖ The Barony Centre, the main hub for Crafttown Scotland in West Kilbride, North Ayrshire
- ❖ The Great Tapestry of Scotland in Galashiels Scottish Borders
- ❖ Haddo Hall in Methlick, Aberdeenshire

All venues have strong local links to volunteer and community led arts activity and people who used those spaces were in attendance.

## Who was there?

Extensive research was undertaken to create a thorough database of groups in each area. Alongside internet search, Sarah also spoke to key connectors in each area, who introduced her to more groups. Each contact found received a personalised email, plus reminder about the event, encouraging them to attend and why it would be great if their group is represented.

Interestingly, it was relatively simple to find groups in the Borders. *We had 23 people booked to attend at The Great Tapestry and 15 came (out of a list of 71 contacts).*

North Ayrshire was a bit more difficult but that seems to be because there are less active groups in that region. *For the event at The Barony, we had 20 people booked and 16 people attended from a database of 52 contacts.*

Aberdeenshire, which is full of volunteer-led arts activity was particularly tricky. It seemed the majority of groups don't have a web presence and it was difficult initially to connect with the key contacts to push this further. Through another project, Sarah was able to initiate a conversation with Lindsay Dunbar who, unbeknownst to Sarah at the time, was the lead freelance consultant on the development of Creative Aberdeenshire Network.

With CAN also keen to meet with people, and also finding out that the National Trust of Scotland were particularly keen for more arts projects to engage with Haddo House & Hall, it seemed an excellent use of resources to combine efforts and put on a full day arts focused event, with the Creative Assembly forming part of it. This did lead to a mixed audience with more professional artists in attendance, but it was worth it.

*For Haddo Hall we had 32 people booked and 31 people attending. We had 48 contacts on our database, but we also publicised through CAN and Live Life Aberdeenshire, so it wasn't solely down to our own research. Only 4 contacts from our database attended.*

Freelance artists/arts workers and volunteers could claim a flat £25 towards their expenses for attending. This was particularly appreciated in the Borders and Aberdeenshire where the cost of getting to the event was high. To have that as an offer, without asking them to jump through hoops presenting receipts etc but to just fill out a simple form on the day was excellent practice. Whilst £25 isn't a huge amount, many commented that they would not have attended without it.



### **Location & Venues**

All areas mentioned location both in what were the biggest challenges but also what was the most wonderful stuff in their area.

North Ayrshire has a large amount of camera clubs, one reason offered is because the landscape is particularly good for photography. However, the area suffers from lack of venues, especially ones for large audiences and for exhibitions. When trying to secure a venue for the Creative Assembly, it highlighted this issue as we were unable to speak to anyone at Harbour Arts Centre, despite several messages and the Barony required a lot of chasing. There wasn't many other suitable arts focused venues in the region.

Aberdeenshire has a unique challenge in that the area is huge, in fact someone from the local authority said it was the biggest land area of any council in the UK. As well as much of it being very rural, there are big issues with poor (and non existent) public transport, alongside the challenges of trying to gather at a central point (there isn't one) so the arts activity tends to be quite localised and collaborative working is a bigger effort.

Those in the Borders felt there were scattered pockets of creativity which would suit an arts tour. Something that Aberdeenshire has with the highly regarded NEOS being a volunteer run arts trail and vast in scale and scope.

Both the Borders and Aberdeenshire reported a particular issue with transport in the winter months, with older participants not wanting to travel at all and limited public transport options.

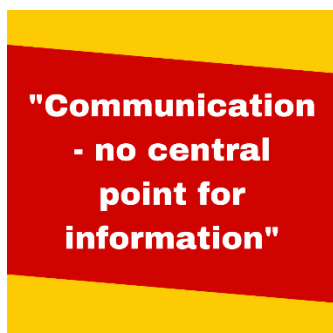
The Borders also has an issue with venues being unreliable – often looked after by volunteer key holders who don't always turn up at the right time. There is also a lack of places where you can be messy and a scarcity of galleries. There is an appetite to utilise under used space in the region, such as old mills and mill buildings and reversing the “rentier” approach.



## Communication and Networks

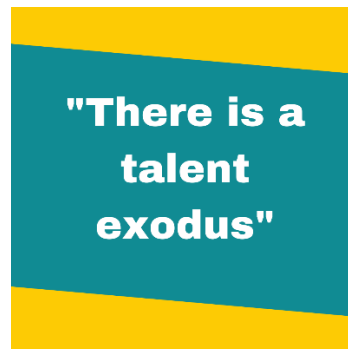
Every area spoke of communication not being as good or as linked up as it could be. A particular sticking point was getting word out to potential participants that a group is keen to recruit new people.

Aberdeenshire has some art form specific network/development agencies that are seen to work very well including NEOS and NEAT (North East Arts Touring, which predominantly focuses on theatre), but it seemed these examples of best practice don't necessarily collaborate or connect up much to support creativity and culture more broadly in the region.



## **Talent Retention**

Both North Ayrshire and the Borders said there wasn't enough arts activity for young people and, as such, there are not enough talent progression opportunities to keep creative young people in the region.



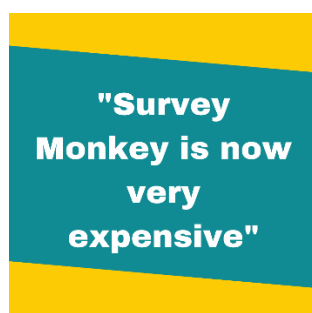
## **Cost of Living**

The timing of the events played a role around how much cost of living came up. The North Ayrshire and Borders events happened at the end of August when cost of living was of course an issue, but was perhaps less dominant in the headlines than when we ran the Aberdeenshire assembly at the end of September.

This is a huge and shared issue across Scotland. Energy costs in venues are likely to make them prohibitively expensive, if they can afford to open at all. Transport costs in regions like the Borders and Aberdeenshire will also greatly impact participation.

There were comments at all three assemblies around the cost of digital connectivity with costs of websites, domains, zoom and survey monkey mentioned.

Several comments were positive about embracing technology and there was much pride about how groups were able to keep going through lockdowns because of it. However, there is a flipside to this as alongside cost, broadband can still be poor, especially in very rural areas.



## **Impact of COVID**

Themes of recruiting new members surfaced around the impact of the pandemic. People being more tentative to try new things and join in. Also, because groups haven't been collaborating or working in partnership for several years, there is an impact on current co-operation. Less momentum already in place.

The loss of volunteers since 2020 was singled out in Aberdeenshire, but from open discussion it would also seem to be a problem in every area.

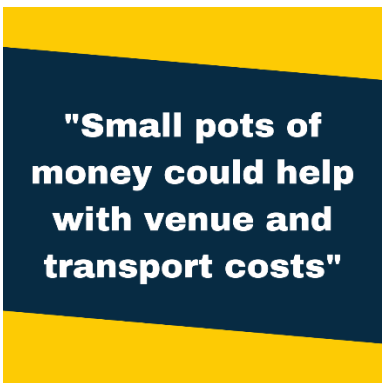
## **Actions and Next Steps**

A selection of the ideas which feel particularly relevant:

All areas zoned in on the need for better communication, more connecting up and more networking opportunities. Also all wanted an online directory (we suggested the Creative Lives map as a starting place).

Lots of discussion around types of network needed – is it for everyone or should it be more focused. For example, CABN in the Borders is focused on professional artists and arts orgs. So what might there be for volunteer led activity? CAN in Aberdeenshire is currently in an embryonic stage, so could be for all or focused more on professional arts.

A group in the Borders assembly suggested a star system ranking local venues on a website where arts leaders can leave reviews making it easier to find a space that suits one's arts practice.



**"Small pots of money could help with venue and transport costs"**



**"An Arts version of Business Gateway"**