



# Spaces for Creativity

A report from Creative Lives  
January 2022

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**We need to see empty buildings made safe,  
so art can be at the heart of our community.**

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# Executive summary

## Local creative groups are crying out for suitable venues

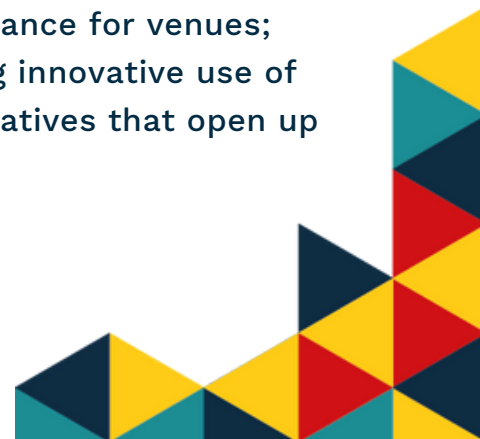
**Creative Lives is a registered charity established in 1991, that champions community and volunteer-led creative activity.**

In late 2021, as indoor creative activity was starting to resume after the restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic, Creative Lives conducted a survey to gather evidence about the issues facing creative groups and venues in the UK and Ireland.

The survey captured a transition point of activity: of the groups that were gathering again, just over half (51%) of the creative groups were back meeting indoors, with 42% in a mix of remote and in-person, and the remainder meeting entirely remotely (6%) or outdoors (1%).

We found a wide array of issues as creative groups started to reconvene after the restrictions of the pandemic, but the overall picture is that local creative groups are struggling to find suitable venues in which to meet. Groups reported difficulties finding large enough venues with adequate ventilation; restrictions on their activities or participant numbers; and finding accessible venues at a reasonable cost.

To help address these difficulties and create an environment that is more supportive of community-based creative activity than before the pandemic, Creative Lives will be embarking on a new phase of work to support restarting local creative activity, including publishing guidance for venues; offering micro-grants; sharing case studies demonstrating innovative use of public space; building new alliances and piloting new initiatives that open up public spaces to creative groups.



# Introduction

**The importance of appropriate community venues is a perennial issue for voluntary creative groups. In order to practice their creativity together, people need affordable and suitable places to meet, to rehearse, to practice and to perform.**

Creative Lives has made ‘Opening up more public spaces for creative cultural activity’ one of its three strategic priorities, and we explored the issue in our 2019 report ‘Common Ground: Rewilding the Garden’: identifying ‘space’ as one of the three requisites for supporting local creative cultural activity.

With this survey, Creative Lives attempted to build a picture of the pre-pandemic and current needs and concerns for creative groups and the spaces they occupy. We also wanted to hear about exciting and innovative uses of different spaces for creative cultural activity.

The following report presents an overview of our findings and assessment of the current situation. It is important to note that the survey was live during November and December 2021, during which pandemic restrictions were generally low and many creative groups were reconvening in person. Most responses came in before concerns about the Omicron variant resulted in new restrictions.



Picture: Art4Space at the Roupell Park Estate in Brixton, South London

# Overview of responses

**The purpose of the survey was to ascertain the pre-pandemic and current needs and concerns of creative groups and the spaces they occupy.**

We received just under 200 responses to the survey from creative groups and venues across the UK and Republic of Ireland.

80% of the responses were from creative groups and 20% from venues, although a total of 15 creative groups reported owning their own venue.

Creative groups reported taking part in a hugely diverse range of creative activities, from singing, music, drama, crafts, writing and visual arts to photography, film, digital creativity, circus, comedy and hip hop. This diversity of artform was reflected in the range of activities hosted by the venues.

According to the survey, 51% of creative groups were back meeting indoors, with 42% of respondents operating in a mix of remote and in-person. 6% of respondents reported meeting entirely remotely, and just 1% meeting outdoors.

Although only 1% of the groups reported currently meeting entirely outdoors, many reported previous difficulties in convening outside, particularly in the warmer months, with adverse weather and finding suitable facilities (such as toilets) being the most commonly cited issues. Securing appropriate permission was cited by 23% of respondents; with health & safety concerns also reported by some.

Inevitably, what the survey doesn't fully capture is the creative groups who have closed or are still in abeyance since the start of the pandemic, although many comments testify to the difficulties:



**We have practically had to stop singing as it is too difficult online and it's too cold to be outside. It's a real heartbreak as we had kept the group going through thick and thin for a number of years!**





# Creative groups and venues - Before the pandemic

**Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, creative activity took place most commonly in community centres, church halls, schools, arts centres, libraries and pubs as well as members' homes.**

Creative groups are distinctive as the majority don't own their own buildings (just 10% of respondents to our survey owned their own space), but meet in a wide range of venues managed across the public, private and voluntary sectors. The diversity of different venues cited by creative groups (which also included museums, working men's clubs and farms) testifies to their flexibility and adaptability. Our biennial Big Conversation surveys have previously found that creative groups were characterised by remarkable positivity, resilience and determination.

The following issues were cited as the most important criteria for choosing a venue for creative activity:

1. Physical accessibility of the building
2. Location, suitable travel and parking
3. Availability of appropriate equipment and flexible opening times
4. Affordability

Using the same criteria, we also asked what were the main challenges in finding a suitable venue:

1. Storage options
2. Suitable travel and parking
3. Flexible opening times and appropriate equipment

But of course many groups reported that finding any venue at the moment was extremely difficult.



Picture: Insole Court, Cardiff

# Creative groups and venues - Current issues

**Prior to the pandemic, creative groups were already experiencing difficulties in finding venues due to cuts to public funding resulting in the closure of public buildings, and commercial hire rates (across sectors) exceeding the budget of many groups.**

We wanted to establish an understanding of current hire costs, so our survey asked about the approximate hourly hire cost groups currently pay, and the average cost across all nations was £22 per hour, with a range from from 'free' to £100.

We also wanted to explore the nature of the relationships between creative groups and their venues, so asked if creative groups received any additional support from their venue. Many groups reported 'no', but this was by no means a single view, as others reported highly supportive relationships with their venues, that provided help with publicity and advertising (e.g. mention in a newsletter, social media); and help with set up, equipment, tables etc. Many groups mentioned friendly venue staff as a key benefit.



**The council says they can't afford the additional cleaning costs but we can see a very real cost to our young people's mental and physical welfare.**



But the majority of creative groups reported recent difficulties in finding a suitable venue, giving a picture of the numerous issues in restarting creative activity safely across the nations:

- We heard that some creative groups have ceased because venues aren't available, with others reporting that many venues haven't reopened yet.
- Many groups reported moving venues when previous venues were closed or no longer suitable.

- One of the most commonly-cited problems was finding big enough venues to enable social distancing and appropriate ventilation - with some groups reporting that they had to split into two in order to continue safely, and others having to turn away new members once they reached venue capacity.
- Many groups were experiencing restrictions to participant numbers and opening times, as well as restrictions on the activities that could take place.
- Some groups reported that many participants and audiences were still uneasy about returning to indoor activity, making regrouping unviable.
- And some reported frustrations with the changing guidance from governments.

We also asked what one thing would make the most difference to your group's ability to find and use the space you need? The top answer, unsurprisingly, was reasonable cost. The next thing most commonly requested was sufficient storage space and access, both in terms of public transport and free parking, and accessibility of the venues. Creative groups also expressed a need for flexible opening hours, as well as flexibility more generally for the different requirements of creative groups. Some groups expressed a desire for their own space.



**We need continuity - a place of our own that would become a hub of activity.**



It's clear that the pandemic and its attendant restrictions have had a devastating impact on creative groups' ability to reconvene in person: an impact that is continuing with the difficulties in finding suitable venues. The restrictions have meant that previous activities have needed to change. For example, large rooms with open windows and doors, combined with the need for face coverings, have made hearing others clearly a near impossibility.



Picture: Sandwich Concert Band

# The view from the venues

**We invited venues where creative groups meet to share their views about the current levels of in-person and indoor activity.**

The venues that responded host a diverse range of artforms, and the majority offer accessible entry, storage and flexible opening times, as well as equipment and catering.

37% of the venues reported that users have fully returned since restrictions eased, with 58% reporting partial return, and just 5% reporting that no groups have returned.

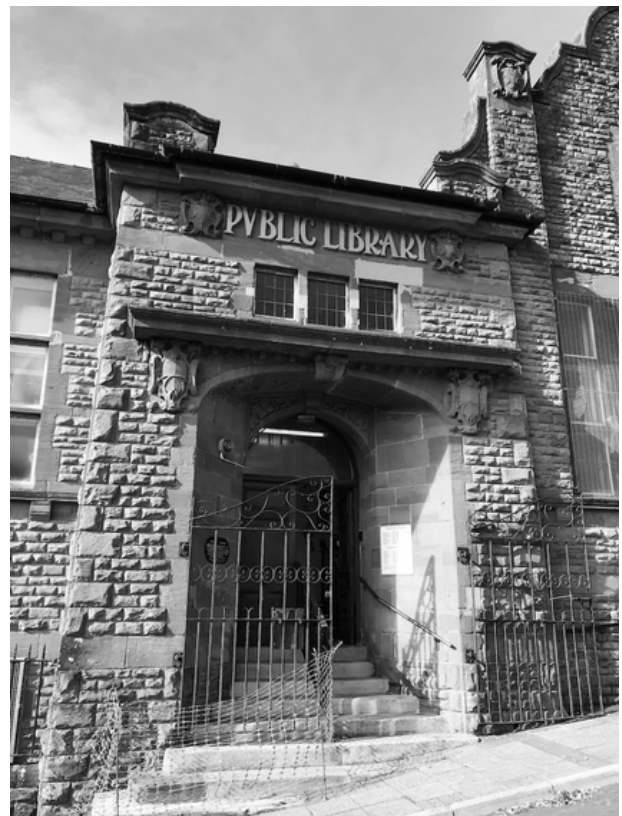
We asked venues about issues that might prevent activity from restarting. Responses mirrored those of the creative groups: lack of space limiting numbers; sufficient ventilation; and limitations on activity due to the current guidelines. Some venues cited problems due to staff shortages, and anxiety from participants about returning to in-person activity.

A large majority (95%) of venue respondents reported that they would like to attract more creative groups to their venue.

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**We encourage an exchange of ideas and have residential accommodation for groups on site.**

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Picture: Dowlais Library, Merthyr Tydfil





# Conclusion and next steps



**We'd like venues to have a specific community agenda where they are encouraged to help those providing genuine community-building activities.**



**The importance of involvement in community-based creative activity cannot be overstated, and the loss of communal arts practice during the pandemic was profound.**

There are numerous proven benefits to individuals of participation in creative cultural activity - such as improved health, wellbeing and social connection - and research (e.g. [Connected Communities: The role of grassroots arts activities in communities](#)) has enumerated the benefits of creative activity to venues and communities. These include grassroots arts activities generating a considerable amount of economic activity and value; rendering a community more aesthetically pleasing; contributing to a sense of identity and community cohesion; and improving community image and identity.

The [UCL Covid-19 Social Study](#) has shown that for some demographic groups, there has been a considerable increase in the risk of loneliness during the pandemic. We know from our biennial surveys of creative participation (e.g. [Big Conversation 2018](#)) that the primary reason for joining a creative group is to connect with others, and that involvement in communal creative activity is hugely beneficial for improving social connection and reducing loneliness.

While many creative groups responded imaginatively to the pandemic restrictions by meeting remotely, there is now an urgent need to facilitate the restarting of creative activity in person - safely within national guidelines. There is also an opportunity to build on the increased interest in everyday creativity that occurred during the national lockdowns. The availability of venues is one of the most important conditions that will help more people and communities realise the manifold benefits of shared creative activity.

With ‘Spaces for Creativity’ already one of our priorities, Creative Lives will embark on a new, solutions-focused phase of our work. Over the coming months we will:

- Publish a short guide to help venues host creative groups in a way that promotes mutual benefit. The venue requirements for most creative groups are modest: accessible, affordable and flexible, and this survey would suggest that venues would like to attract more creative activity to their spaces.
- Offer microgrants to local creative groups to assist with the costs of restarting in-person activity (e.g. [Reviving local creativity in Kent](#), [Microgrants in Scotland](#), [Cheshire West Microgrants](#)), and share interesting and innovative examples of public spaces used for creative cultural activity.
- Build new alliances through networks, and pilot new initiatives that open up public spaces to creative groups.
- Advocate for a policy environment that enables community-based creative activity to rebuild and thrive, and that does not adversely impact the ability of people to practice their creativity together."



**We're just desperate to get back to what we love.  
Access should be a fundamental right for all.**



Picture:  
Creative People  
of Folkestone



**Creative Lives is a registered charity established in 1991, that champions community and volunteer-led creative activity. We work to improve opportunities for everyone to be creative and, in particular, celebrate and promote people expressing themselves creatively with others, recognising the benefits this brings to both individuals and communities.**

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