



**Creative
Lives**

Consultation Response
Culture in Communities

March 2023



[Creative Lives](#) is a registered charity, established in 1991. We champion community and volunteer-led creative activity, and work to improve opportunities for everyone to be creative. We celebrate and promote people expressing themselves creatively with others, recognising the benefits this can bring.

We work with communities, organisations and creative individuals as a voice for positive change, to improve and expand the landscape in which creative participation can take place. We aim to address inequalities in access to creative participation, promote inclusivity, connect people and communities, and seek to increase awareness of the links between creativity and wellbeing.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation, and our response is shaped directly by the results of our [Big Conversation annual survey](#), together with our day to day interaction with the leaders of creative groups, on the challenges they face. The most recent findings of the survey found that:

- ***A majority of volunteer-led creative groups are struggling with increased costs.***
- ***Despite the increased cost of living and the lingering effects of the pandemic, optimism about the future of voluntary creative activity is now at the highest level since 2017.***

91% of respondents to our survey reported that they were currently involved in a creative group or a national network of creative groups, with a diverse range of artforms represented, from visual arts and crafts through music, singing, drama and dance, to writing, photography and film.

They told us that being involved in creative activity within their local community:

“Helps me in terms of emotional and physical wellbeing. Helps us all to form connections and friendships, to share our lived experience, and to learn new skills.”

“I love being able to share my joy of crafting with other people and watch them flourish and grow in confidence.”

“Having something to look forward to each week to get away from the stresses in life.”

“Seeing people embrace their creativity in ways that aren't often enough encouraged by the mainstream.”

We believe their views and testimony will provide useful insight for the committee to consider with a particular focus on local volunteer-led creative activity.

The Big Conversation survey also measures levels of optimism among creative groups. Voluntary creative groups are characterised by their positivity, scoring on average over 4 on a scale of 1 to 5 when asked about how optimistic they felt about the future of their groups or activities.

Despite the cost of living crisis, this year the figure was an encouraging 4.4 out of 5, up a little from 2020 (4.2) and a pre-pandemic survey in 2018 (4.35).

Scotland has more than 10,000 volunteer-run creative groups bringing vibrancy, imagination, fun and connection to every community across the country. From choirs and amateur drama groups, to sewing circles, poetry slams and ukulele bands. The individuals involved in these groups selflessly give up their time and energy to deliver a range of creative activities that promote community cohesion and resilience.

Our survey found an increase in the number of hours that people contribute for free to creative groups. Of those that volunteer their time each week, the average number of hours was 9. This is an increase from 2020, where the average was 7.05 hours per week, which in turn was up from 6.3 hours per week in 2018

There can be no doubt that volunteer-led, locally based creative groups represent the true backbone of culture in Scotland, yet it is one of the most overlooked parts of our cultural landscape.

Through our work we know that our sector provides valued opportunities for creative participation and we can demonstrate why taking part in creative cultural activity improves social connectedness and wellbeing.

We also believe that our sector needs to be enabled to access public spaces which can be used to combat key social challenges by generating practical support, increasing social capital, while also becoming cherished places where creativity can flourish.

Our consultation response sets out the key issues facing community-based, volunteer-led creative groups, demonstrates the contribution we have made as a charity to ease these issues and presents some ideas for the committee to consider which we believe would offer community-based creative groups hope during this time of challenge.

1. Increased Costs

Volunteer-led, community-based creative groups exist in every corner of Scotland, but many may operate below the radar. In recent years these groups have faced a range of complex challenges; the ongoing impact of austerity, Covid-19, and current cost of living crisis.

74% of respondents told us that they'd experienced increased costs for materials and equipment as well as venue hire, utilities and insurance. Nearly half (49%) of groups support people experiencing financial difficulties. Many groups were providing warm spaces and free hot drinks; collecting for foodbanks, knitting hats and gloves; and others have moved to a pay-what-you-can model or were waiving costs entirely.

Micro-grants

One of our key contributions to easing the challenges created by increased costs in 2022 was the delivery of 54 micro-grants (£300 each) to volunteer-led creative groups. This funding was made possible through the support of the Scottish Government via the Scottish Community Alliance's 'Pockets & Prospects' fund. The micro-grants supported the return to face-to-face activity after the pandemic, as well as contributing towards purchasing materials, renting space and transport costs to mitigate the cost of living crisis. This was a light touch and flexible approach to funding which was able to reach grassroots groups for whom large grants would be inappropriate or inaccessible.

Here are just two examples from the 54 recipients of our recent micro-grants:

RIG Arts from Greenoak used their micro-grant to make vital capital improvements by renovating their unit into a fit-for-purpose community arts studio to support their wide range of participants including autistic young people, low-income families, the elderly, people with mental ill health, and disengaged youth.

Sewing2gether All Nations are based in Paisley and work with members of the refugee and asylum seeker community, primarily supporting women who wish to practice English and build new friendships. They used their micro-grant to support a Travel Empowerment Programme, seeking to engage with some harder to reach families, isolated women with no English language skills, arranging to bring them into their base by taxi and begin building relationships. The financial situation of those navigating the asylum system is precarious, and non-essential travel is unaffordable.

For consideration

We have demonstrated how a little can go a long way. We would encourage the Committee to explore further the need for a regular funded micro-grant programme for community-based and volunteer-led groups. Small pots of money enable groups in our sector to both thrive and survive, providing true value for money and a major social return on a small investment.

2. Local Venues and creative places

As a legacy impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, many local venues and facilities have remained closed. Those that have reopened are now more expensive, which is seeing local groups 'priced out' of their own local communities.

Just 10% of voluntary creative groups own their own venues, the majority meet in a variety of different venues across the public, private and voluntary sectors. Respondents to our survey reflected this diversity, with activities taking place in libraries, community centres, church halls, village halls, shops, cafes and pubs; with a few groups meeting in their own homes

or outdoors. Just under a fifth (18%) of groups still had an online element to their activities.

In late 2022, we hosted three 'Creative Assemblies' in North Ayrshire, Scottish Borders and Aberdeenshire. Attendees at each event highlighted the concerns of the sector in relation to the accessibility of local places/venues.

Respondents from North Ayrshire said that the area suffers from a lack of venues, especially ones for large audiences and for exhibitions.

In Aberdeenshire the geography of the area proved a challenge. In lacking a central area, arts activity tended to be quite localised making collaborative working difficult.

Those in the Borders felt there was an unreliability of access to venues.

These are scenarios common to local groups across the country. Finding appropriate and affordable venues is an increasing challenge, some groups have found that they have had to increase their subscriptions, although many groups feel that they're unable to charge their members any more. Some groups are having to come up with new ways to raise funds, such as seeking new sponsorships or donations; holding paid exhibitions or online art sales.

In late 2021, as indoor creative activity resumed after the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions, we surveyed groups to gather evidence about the issues facing creative groups and venues in the UK and Ireland. Through this survey we have established that there is a wide cost range in hiring venues for creative activity with the average cost across the UK being £22 per hour, with a range from 'free' to £100.

Local authority-owned spaces in Scotland are often operated via arms length trusts. Community Leisure UK (CLUK), the membership association that represents these trusts, reported that of the 19 charitable Culture and Leisure Trusts in Scotland interviewed in November 2022, 63% are in "*discussions and planning*" relating to the closure of local venues including community halls, theatres and libraries. They highlight increasing energy bills, local authority pay awards and depleted reserves as adding to the financial pressure.

Participants in the three Creative Assemblies also highlighted various issues relating to poor public transport and/or traffic infrastructure which can make it very difficult for people - especially older people or lone women - to get home at night after taking part in a group. Decreasing (or in some

rural areas, non-existent) bus and train services in the evening effectively preclude some people from taking part in anything outside their own living room. Even a 'local' venue that's a 20-minute walk away can be out of bounds for somebody walking home in the dark at 9pm.

Make *'Spaces for Creativity'*

In our 2021 *'Spaces for Creativity'* survey, 95% of venue respondents reported that they would like to attract more creative groups to their venue.

We are currently working to create 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; venues should be accessible, affordable and flexible. These three considerations should be at the heart of any new policy designed to open and sustain community based venues.

The current review into the Community Empowerment Act should seek to deliver a simplified process, with policies that enable community-based creative activity to rebuild and thrive, rather than the current case where bureaucracy and complexity adversely impacts on the ability of people to practise their creativity together.

Many local authorities face reduced budgets and are going through a period of significant challenge. Rather than take a solely fiscal based approach to setting their budgets, Councils should explore new creative wellbeing models of partnership with creative community groups.

For consideration

The communities we belong to, live, work, play and grow old in are the primary source of our physical and mental health which affects the kind of life we are able to live. We believe that everyone should have the right to access creativity activities in their own communities and that in communities where creativity is nurtured, innovation, resilience and belonging can flourish.

'Place-based' cultural policy can only be achieved by gaining a true insight into the role of creative networks at the most local level. We need to recognise the diversity and scale of culture in Scotland. Government(s) must acknowledge that creativity extends far beyond the boundaries of the professional and publicly funded arts sector.

Encouragement should be given to local authorities to work with Creative Lives to connect with a broader range of voices, map activity and support increased participation in arts and creativity at grassroots level through our [Creative Citizens](#) project. This process would help uncover and engage a wider range of grassroots creative voices, map and record relevant grassroots creative groups and identify gaps that represent unmet cultural needs.

By mapping locally based creative assets and understanding their work, Local Authorities can unlock the great potential that exists within the volunteer-led creative sector to support community wellbeing. Local creative groups embody the principles of community-driven change, collaboration, and empowerment. Through their efforts, they can create meaningful change at the local level and contribute to a broader movement for social and cultural transformation.

By building the right supporting infrastructure and the capabilities/capacity of voluntary creativity groups, Local Authorities will see a development of soft resilience to take on social challenges at the local level and will deliver a boost to community connection and wellbeing.

Scotland should create a place-based approach to culture that is focused on responding to an individual community and its geography, resources, strengths and talents. Place-based cultural policy is important because it helps to build and strengthen community identity and cohesion by celebrating and preserving local cultural traditions and heritage. As a strategy it will be of great importance to promote cultural vitality, local economic and skills development and creative placemaking.

Local creative groups should be central to any local discussion on place-based policies in their communities which would promote creativity and innovation in the arts at a local level

Any place-based approach to cultural activity should also seek to fully promote cultural diversity and encourage the participation of marginalised groups in cultural activities, which can lead to increased social inclusion.

3. Social Isolation

A survey carried out by [The Mental Health Foundation in 2022](#) found that more than three-quarters of adults in Scotland (78%) say they have felt lonely at some point in the last year and that a quarter of adults in Scotland (25%) say they felt lonely some or all of the time in the last month.

When asked what could help tackle loneliness, 56% said making it easier for people to find groups, clubs or places where they can meet others in person. 49% said providing affordable ways for people to interact with others in-person/join social activities. 46% said new or improved community-based clubs and activities in the local area where people can meet in person.

Social isolation and loneliness in Scotland is now recognised as a public health crisis and a shared social responsibility between Government, local government, NHS Scotland, communities, the private and third sectors, and all of us as individuals.

Our sector is well placed to support the mission of building stronger social connections while bringing the added evidenced benefits of creative activity.

When we asked people why they joined creative groups, or why they'd like to, company, relationships and positive social interaction was an important factor for many:

- *I get to meet people I wouldn't necessarily meet in my daily life. I also got to share my skills, learn new skills and relax.*
- *Friends. Sense of achievement. It's nice to be part of the local community, getting positive feedback from an audience who have enjoyed a show is the icing on the cake.*
- *Meeting new people, developing confidence and new skills that can be transferable to other aspects of your life.*
- *I think collaborative art is the best kind and there is so much insight and greatness to be gained together.*
- *Meeting others with similar interests, being creative with others, being part of a team, working together on something that can't be done alone*
- *The main benefits are knowing that I have made a positive difference in someone's life, no matter how small or insignificant it may seem to others. Or just sharing a conversation or a cup of tea is an opening of the heart... Seeing others happy makes me happy!*

- *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 approaches to tackling social or public health issues in Scotland can become too national and centralised. More impactful change can be made by taking a bottom up approach.

For Consideration

Small, local groups and organisations foster a feeling of belonging. By bringing together individuals who share common goals and values, local groups can build social capital and create opportunities for collective action. This means that local creative groups across Scotland have the potential and the power to transform the social isolation that exists within our communities into social connectedness if they are properly enabled and supported by Government(s).

Additionally, local groups can serve as models for other communities and organisations. They can demonstrate effective strategies for addressing social and cultural issues and provide inspiration and guidance for others seeking to create positive change. By connecting with other local groups and sharing their experiences and insights, these groups can contribute to a broader movement for social transformation.

Beyond the topic of social Isolation, it is now well evidenced that peoples' arts activity is linked to longevity and other positive health outcomes across different life stages, including:

- More positive health and social behaviours in children and young people
- Better mental health in adulthood
- Lower risks of depression and dementia in later life
- Lower levels of chronic pain and frailty, and even a longer life.

The 2017 '*Creative Health*' report emphasised three key messages:

1. *The arts aid recovery and help people to live longer and better lives*
2. *The arts can help to tackle major problems in health and social care such as ageing, long-term conditions, loneliness and mental health*
3. *The arts can save money in health and social care.*

Arts activities in healthcare have also been found to save health services money, with an estimated SROI of between £4 and £11 for every £1 invested in arts on prescription.

Much of this work is carried out by the professional arts sector. In 2021, Creative Scotland mapped the provision of arts-related activity led by one or more professional artists, created with explicit artistic and health or artistic and wellbeing objectives, and designed to enhance the health and/or wellbeing of those with a health related condition or illness, the wider public, and the healthcare workforce.

They identified 119 organisations delivering arts and health provision in Scotland. There is a clustering of provision in Glasgow City, Edinburgh and across the central belt, and more limited provision in local authority areas including Highland, Moray, Angus, Perth and Kinross, Aberdeen and Dundee, largely reflecting variations in population size across the country.

Social prescribing of creativity activity and referring individuals to a range of local, non-clinical activities or services is an important approach to self-management of mental health.

However, many people who are offered such advice often need a little bit of persuasion to attend or participate in new groups. Even when the person has expressed an interest in doing so, there can be tangible barriers to overcome first, for example, transport, accessibility issues and financial implications. Therefore additional consideration should be given to the role of locally based, voluntary arts and creative groups in this area. By being rooted in local areas, these groups remove some of these barriers and also have greater authenticity and long term sustainability within their community. Local groups should be supported to be at the heart of local strategies, utilising their creative skills and talents to help deliver improvements in local wellbeing.

4. Unmet Cultural Need

Scotland's culture strategy aims to "recognise each community's own local cultures in generating a distinct sense of place, identity and confidence"

Yet, political discourse often talks of the arts and culture as an ecosystem, which fails to fully recognise that voluntary creative groups are often disconnected and isolated from the wider arts sector.

Part of our strategic work is to build strong connections and relationships to support participation in creative cultural activity. We aim to connect all these parts in a movement of local, regional and national networks, in order to develop a more mutually-supportive environment for creative cultural activity.

However there can be no doubt that there are sections of our society whose cultural needs go unmet.

There appears to be little local or national coordination in how best to identify unmet cultural needs. In our view, identifying unmet cultural needs requires a collaborative effort between community members, leaders, and organisations. By working together, it is possible to identify areas where support is needed and develop strategies to address those needs. We would suggest as a starting point, holding focus groups to gather information about the cultural practices, beliefs, and values of a particular community, with questions tailored to identify areas where the community feels their cultural needs are not being met or where gaps in provision can be identified.

Local authorities should continue to invest in local arts development officers who would be key in helping to develop a systematic approach of listening and responding to the views, needs and desires of communities of place and interest.

Efforts should be made, founded on theories of social capital and asset-based community development, to overcome barriers to involvement, including addressing:

- Lack of awareness: Many people may not be aware of the creative activities happening in their local community, or may not know how to access them. Better communication of creative activities at local level should be provided by Councils.
- Cost: Participation in creative activities now comes with an increased financial cost. This can be a barrier for people with low incomes or limited financial resources.
- Transportation: Lack of reliable and affordable transportation can make it difficult for people to attend community-based creative activities.

- Social or cultural barriers: People from certain cultural or social backgrounds may feel excluded or unwelcome in certain creative activities or environments.
- Language barriers: People who do not speak the language of the community may have difficulty accessing or participating in creative activities.
- Physical or cognitive disabilities: Physical or cognitive disabilities can make it difficult or impossible for people to participate in certain creative activities or access certain environments.

Addressing these barriers can involve strategies such as improving awareness of community-based creative activities, such as our [Creativity Map](#), providing financial assistance, offering flexible schedules or remote participation options, improving transportation, promoting inclusivity and diversity in creative environments, providing translation services or materials, and ensuring accessibility for people with disabilities

In 2022 we initiated a community engagement project to investigate the needs of creative groups led by and for people of colour. This was done to better support and champion the diverse needs of Scotland's creative groups. The knock on effect of this work will continue to be used to build a richer picture of creativity in Scotland to help inform the progress of making creative activity a right and necessity for all, especially those from marginalised groups.

At our recent [Creative Lives Awards](#), the group 'African and Caribbean Elders Scotland (ACES)' won an award for their work in planning and facilitating three, free, public oral history events online to mark Doors Open Days, Black History Month and International Men's Day.

Their event broke down traditional barriers and under-representation, allowing speakers to reflect on a variety of topics ranging from love, education and parenting, to immigration, the impact of the Black Lives Matter movement and fighting injustice. Sharing their experiences and knowledge with new listeners reinforced a sense of community while recording this important part of Scottish history, heritage and culture for future generations.

The success of this, and other local groups who serve minority communities, demonstrates the benefit of creative activities that specifically support Black and people of colour individuals within their local areas to raise awareness of social issues within these communities to provide support, togetherness and encouragement.