

Care in Creative Hubs during Covid-19 and beyond

Background

The pandemic and associated lockdown measures had a major impact on creative and cultural sectors, compounding existing vulnerabilities and precarity. With the closure of cultural spaces, creative workers had nowhere physical to perform, create, exhibit or sell their work or engage their audiences. Grassroots and smaller cultural organisations have been particularly vulnerable and less well positioned to access support compared with more high-profile institutions. In response to the challenges of the pandemic, cultural and creative hubs were shown to play a vital role in supporting people in local communities, collecting and re-distributing resources, sharing information, coordinating responses and connecting with the isolated, and along with that came an intensification of practices of care at various scales.

This briefing paper draws on the key findings of research on the activities of one such cultural hub, Creative Stirling, (a registered charity and creative agency established in 2012). It provides a summary of implications for policymakers and practitioners in Scotland, particularly those involved in cultural placemaking in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and in the midst of the cost-of-living crisis and contraction of public funding. It will also be important to those attempting to sustain the activities of Scotland's cultural and creative hubs and their attendant impacts in local communities.



The Creative Stirling hub played a vital role in addressing the needs of the local community during Covid-19

The project

The University of Stirling project 'Mapping Ecologies of Care in a Creative Hub during COVID-19' funded by the Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) ran from March 2021 to October 2022 and explored the ways in which Creative Stirling and the Kitchen at 44 King Street transformed their activities, mobilised their networks and redeployed their assets during the pandemic and associated lockdowns. The Creative Stirling experience demonstrates the powerful role of creative and cultural activity, skills and innovation in addressing community needs and complex issues at a time of crisis. It shows that if you centre care and trust people on the ground, solutions to complex problems can be found. The findings are delivered at an apposite time in Scotland, with the 2020 Cultural Strategy for Scotland and the establishment of the Scotland National Partnership for Culture (NPC). The current context of economic uncertainty undermines opportunities to redraw priorities with the learning from this period and indeed threatens the infrastructure, relationships and assets that have been so critical to Scotland's communities during the pandemic.

Key findings

The project documented in detail the activities carried out by Creative Stirling, the Kitchen at 44 King Street and Transition Stirling, along with the community groups and individuals with which they were linked during the various pandemic-prompted lockdowns between March 2020 and October 2022. Many of these activities directly addressed local needs through an empowering mutual aid ethos and included (but were not limited to):

- the immediate set up of Stirling Community Food (founded by the Kitchen at 44 King Street and hosted in the physical space of the hub for six months from March 2020), collecting excess food and offering it to everyone in the community for free;
- fundraising;
- creative packs for local children;
- redistribution of books, DVDs and puzzles from a mobile library;
- Christmas hampers for local families;
- free online workshops and some socially distanced in-person workshops to help alleviate social isolation
- providing information and connecting individuals to support (government support for artists);
- virtual pastoral support for those connected to the hub.

Over the pandemic period Creative Stirling reflected at length around rebuilding most effectively, better serving communities and responding to challenges like food waste; the climate crisis and poverty.

Critical to their COVID-19 response were a number of factors:

- *Speed of response* - people were able to use the Creative Stirling and the Kitchen at 44 King Street's assets and relationships to act more nimbly and mobilise quicker than more formal avenues of support
- *Addressing local need* - whilst the hub was closed and in receipt of less prescriptive emergency funding, there were more opportunities to attune activities to the needs of the local context and develop a place-based response to inequalities in the community
- *Hub space was critical* - the autonomy over their building at 44 King Street offered flexibility over how it could be used in the early days of lockdown, although issues with an absentee landlord has subsequently threatened this
- *Ethos of Care* - this was built into their organisational structures and practice and embodied within the relationships mobilised during the pandemic response
- *Vast amounts of work* - required to address the scale and intensity of the issues, whether voluntary or paid and encompassing both physical and emotional.



The Stirling Community Food Project provided over 175,502 meals and prevented 67 tonnes of food going to landfill

Implications for policy and practice

Organisations and individuals interested in nurturing and sustaining cultural and creative hubs should consider the following areas:

- **Design appropriate funding mechanisms and support** – help develop more sustainable frameworks of support for creative hubs;
- **Trusting community leaders to right-size** - more autonomy in the delivery of funding provides cultural organisations more opportunities to attune activities to local needs;
- **New mechanisms for tackling burnout and precarity within cultural work** – the scale and impact of the work involved in running sustainable cultural and creative hubs should be acknowledged and accounted for appropriately within support systems;
- **Protecting the physical spaces in which cultural and creative hubs are housed** – this helps to enable their long-term sustainability and presents a wide array of benefits for high street renewal and regeneration. Tackling empty buildings and encouraging mechanisms for selling properties back to the community or inducing landlords to take a greater interest is an important part of this;
- **Nurture and value the role of creative activities and cultural hubs in small cities and their regions** - despite being downplayed by mainstream creative-industries policy, these places are culturally and economically vibrant;
- **Supporting ‘community-first’ business models within cultural organisations** – cultural organisations, like Creative Stirling, have the potential to help address place-based inequalities and should be central to policy conversations around community wealth building.

About this research

The project team sought to develop and leverage new knowledge relating to the mobilisation of networks of care in a creative hub in a small city during the coronavirus crisis. In order to capture a picture of the complex operation of the activities of Creative Stirling during the pandemic, in the summer of 2021 (June-August 2021) we recorded, transcribed and analysed eight online interviews with key individuals working in or closely with them during this time. Between August and October 2022 we carried out three group interviews (with three to five participants in each, one hybrid and two in-person events) loosely based around three different groups: the Creative Stirling board, the creative community linked to Made in Stirling, and the Kitchen at 44 King Street and the wider community stakeholders involved in Stirling Community Food.

The full report and more details of the project can be accessed here: <https://www.creativestirling.org/rse-report>



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