

# Written evidence submitted by Creative Lives

18 February 2022

## **Creative Lives submission to the DCMS Select Committee Inquiry: Reimagining where we live: cultural placemaking and the levelling up agenda**

### **About Creative Lives**

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

Creative Lives works with communities, organisations, policy-makers, funders and creative individuals as a voice for positive change, to improve and expand the landscape in which creative participation can take place. We do this on a local and national level through advocacy, development and celebrating the activities of creative people, groups and places through the [Creative Lives Awards](#), [Creative Lives On Air](#), our [Creative Networks](#) and [Creative Learning](#) sessions and a diverse range of projects to stimulate creative activity.

### **Overview of the sector**

Across the UK and Ireland there are approximately 63,000 constituted voluntary arts groups, regularly involving more than 10 million people. The voluntary arts and culture sector across the UK is extensive, and includes choirs, hip-hop groups, knitting circles, craft clubs, film, theatre groups, festivals, folk dancing, dyeing and weaving, sculpting and painting, digital creativity and many more artforms. The sector contributes a huge amount to the cultural and civic life of the UK. There are also many community groups that use creativity as a mechanism for connection. For example the [Tudor Roses](#) based in Winchester bring women together to sing and share stories and the [East Kent Chorus](#) use singing to reduce isolation.

There are numerous proven benefits to individuals participating in creative cultural activity, such as improved health, wellbeing and social connection. Crucially research has also enumerated the benefits of creative activity to communities, mostly notably the 2011 [Connected Communities: The role of grassroots arts activities in communities](#) report. This highlights how grassroots arts activities generate a considerable amount of economic activity and value, contributing to community cohesion as well as improving community image and sense of belonging.

### **About this document**

To produce this document we consulted with the [Creative Lives staff team](#) and [Board of Trustees](#) as well as our Creative Advisers: a panel made up of people across the UK and the Republic of Ireland with a wide range of experience in the creative sector. We have also included findings from our January 2022 report: [Space for Creativity](#), which surveyed 200 creative groups and venues across the UK and Republic of Ireland. Significant evidence is also gleaned from our 2020 publication [Common Ground: Rewilding the Garden](#), an investigation into how creative activity is sustained in areas of socio-economic deprivation across the UK and Republic of Ireland i.e. places that may be considered to have limited local arts infrastructure.

This response was developed alongside a separate submission from the National Centre for Creative Health, Culture Health and Wellbeing Alliance and Lived Experience Network, who promote the integration of creative approaches to health and wellbeing, whose work we support.

### **The role of Everyday Creativity in supporting the levelling up agenda**

Creative Lives promotes and supports active participation in cultural activity, beyond publicly funded arts and cultural experiences, which traditionally focus on venues, visitors and audiences. There are extensive proven benefits to regular participation in creative activities: improved mood and resilience; increased social connection; improved physical and mental health and skills development. UCL research shows that *'taking part in even a small amount of creative activity can improve wellbeing, [and] people use creativity as coping mechanisms to control their emotions'* (Fancourt, D. 2020).

Creative Lives promotes 'Everyday Creativity' - the notion that creativity is for all and has the potential to be a catalyst for change in individuals and communities. 'Everyday Creativity' is often led by community and voluntary groups and therefore not always visible to policy makers and decision makers, but has a huge role to play in the levelling up agenda, empowering people, and communities to create the places they want to live and work in. These creative groups can be the glue that hold communities together and drive social connectedness and collective action. The role and potential of Everyday Creativity became increasingly evident during the pandemic when we witnessed huge swaths of society turn to creative activity to help them cope and connect with the impacts of lockdown restrictions.

Creative Lives has been championing 'Everyday Creativity' activity for over 30 years via our networks, locally based champions, and resources to help people set up and sustain creative activity. Creative Lives has built an online [Creativity Map](#), which lists and supports groups across the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

### ***How can culture reanimate our public spaces and shopping streets?***

There are many examples along with compelling research into how both large scale capital projects and grassroots creative practice impact public spaces and the high streets<sup>1</sup>. Creative Lives advocates for community, volunteer-led, grassroots responses to reanimating public space and high streets, which involves local people and community groups in decision making and provides people with the tools and ambition to create the places they want to live in.

Initiatives such as the [Deverton project](#) in Aberdeen (their strapline is *'the town is the venue'*), connects artists, communities and places through creative engagement and research. They demonstrate how local creativity can galvanise communities to take an active role in shaping what their community looks like. Venues such as the [Horton Epsom](#) strive to create a social space *via* an arts venue, placing people and connectivity at its core.

There are also many positive examples of local councils enabling creative practitioners and voluntary-led groups to access unused spaces in local areas at reduced or free rates. These examples can produce great results and enable grassroots creativity to flourish, however these schemes can only work if they are valued in the long term, so sustainable relationships can be formed between creative organisations

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<sup>1</sup> [Culture and High Streets – Final Report \(bop.co.uk\)](#): <https://www.bop.co.uk/reports/culture-and-high-streets?s=03>

and the community. Creativity activity needs time to become established and recognised before people regularly engage.

Investment and support for flagship projects or annual events can also play a role in connecting people to place and community, as well as create opportunities and work. Events such as the '*West Norwood Feast* - a volunteer powered street market' brings together not only arts and creativity, but food & market traders, faith-based organisations and sports activities. These place-based cultural events demonstrate how creativity and culture can be the catalyst for a rich civic life, which utilises local community talent and brings people and business together to generate pride about where they live. One resident comments:

*"The area's crowning achievement, and a testament to the community spirit in the neighbourhood, is the West Norwood Feast [...] it's more than just another street market."*<sup>2</sup>

For community and volunteer-led creative initiatives to successfully play a role in reanimating public space Creative Lives would encourage policy makers to consider:

- the importance of thinking about the role of creativity and culture in its broadest sense - including food, nature, walking, faith, local history, and community events
- that the regularity of creative activity is important (whether weekly or annual etc) and this requires access to sustainable local funding and suitable, affordable spaces
- that people and businesses often choose areas to live and work in based on the number of active community groups and creative opportunities available: therefore, policies that seek genuine asset-based engagement are more likely to have sustainable impact in place making<sup>3</sup>
- that the increase in working from home, brought about by the pandemic, are likely to drive the demand for local creative activity, which needs to be led by grassroots initiatives.

### ***How can creatives contribute to local decision-making and planning of place?***

Community and volunteer-led creative groups can contribute to local decision making, regeneration and the planning of place, and additionally they can provide creative mechanisms for the broader community to engage in these processes.

Projects such as the Stove Network – an art and community organisation in the Heart of Dumfries High Street provides a café, meeting place and diverse creative programme, which covers music, dance as well as town planning and design.

Creative Lives recently published a case study about Maker World in Huddersfield, Kirklees, West Yorkshire, which demonstrates how long term engagement between local councils and creative organisations can bring about solutions that meet the needs of local people. Maker World runs free workshops for children and families in the town centre. They, along with other creative initiatives have increased footfall and brought hope and inspiration to the town centre via a space which was provided for free by the council. Kirklees has recently been identified as one of Arts Council England's priority areas in the north. Research by the Same Skies Think Tank <sup>4</sup> From Failing

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<sup>2</sup> <https://westnorwoodfeast.com/about/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Culture-led%20regeneration%20achieving%20inclusive%20and%20sustainable%20growth.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://sameskiesthinktank.com/failing-shopping-centre-to-flourishing-arts-centre-piazza-arts-centre->

Shopping Centre to Flourishing Arts tells us more about this successful approach.

The role of local networks and umbrella organisations such as Evoke (the Kirklees Local Cultural Education Partnership) , is important to enable creative practitioners to engage in decision making and place making, as many individuals and small organisations do not have capacity to engage in strategic activity when they have very limited resources available.

### **Creativity groups can have broad purpose and impact**

Creative activity doesn't exist in a silo and working collectively with other voluntary and community partners can make change happen locally. For example in 2015 in East Ayrshire in Scotland, the Cumnock Area Musical Production Society took responsibility for Barrhill Community Centre, becoming the first community organisation in the region to successfully complete a Community Asset Transfer. The venue now runs first aid classes, children's drama, a floral art club and a creative group for adults with mental ill-health. Creative groups can serve other functions too, such as local fundraising - the Knitting Nannas based in Pontypridd in Wales have raised thousands of pounds to support local charities and causes.

***How can the Government support places without established artistic infrastructure to take full advantage of the opportunities that the levelling up agenda provides?***

### **Build on community assets and local infrastructure beyond the arts**

In late 2020, Creative Lives published a report, Common Ground: Rewilding the Garden, which investigated how creative activity is supported in areas of socio-economic deprivation across the UK and Republic of Ireland. A series of 'Open Conversations' between 2017-19 revealed a huge amount of existing creative activity in almost every part of the UK and Ireland<sup>5</sup>. This activity is often unfunded, amateur, everyday creativity rather than professional arts but, crucially, is no less valuable in contributing to the levelling up agenda.

Creative Lives visited places where official surveys suggest there is nothing going on and found a rich grassroots culture - where local people are achieving wonderful things with volunteers, donated materials, and resources. Despite the diversity of activity across the nations, there were commonalities in both the benefits creativity brought and, in the support needs identified to enable this work to flourish. The research categorised three requirements needed for local creative cultural activity to thrive:

- access to appropriate **spaces**
- the need to support and foster **creative citizens** - the people who make things happen on the ground
- the need for local creative groups to receive **recognition and support** – through funding, media coverage and specialist support and networking opportunities.

Our recent Spaces survey reinforces these themes, finding that: *'the majority of creative groups reported recent difficulties in finding a suitable venue'*. The report found that the pandemic had further hindered the ability of community and volunteer-led creative groups to survive, **with only**

## **51% having returned to meeting completely in-person since the pandemic began in 2020.**

It's clear that the pandemic and its restrictions have had a devastating impact on creative groups' ability to reconvene in person: an impact that is compounded with the difficulties in finding suitable venues. Groups consistently say: '*We need continuity - a place of our own that would become a hub of activity*'.

### **Recognition and support**

Our research found that recognition of groups and creative citizens is important to sustainability. This can come from a variety of sources, exhibitions, media, community, as well as local and national awards schemes. Since 2011 Creative Lives has run annual Awards to celebrate local achievement. In 2019, Eltham Arts were shortlisted for an award - their inclusive, multimedia arts and wellbeing project, 'Wall' involved more than 2,000 people from their local community in the Royal Borough of Greenwich, London.

Creative Lives provides support and advice around health and safety, insurance, and policy to enable groups to have the confidence and skills to start and more importantly continue their creative endeavours. Our dispersed Development Officer team works across England to develop regional connections and initiate and encourage creative activity to thrive, but this can only happen with the local infrastructure and investment to support and sustain the activity.

### **Provide mechanisms to ensure information about local creative opportunities is available**

Our 2020 biennial survey 'The Big Conversation' found that of those who identified as current non-participants in creative activity, 80% wanted to engage in creative and cultural activity, but saw a lack of information as the biggest barrier. An Arts Council England research project<sup>6</sup> (2018) involved 500 young people aged 7-25 and found that young people want to get involved with the arts but often do not know how to, citing '*Lack of opportunities in my area*' and '*I don't know where to find opportunities*' as barriers to taking part. This research also showed that young people wanted arts opportunities to tackle mental health and wellbeing issues.

Libraries, newspaper, online and media outlets that bring together local information and disseminate it to local communities are an important part of the ecosystem and ensure investment in art and culture is then fully utilised by the public. The need to invest and co-ordinate approaches to marketing and 'what's on' guides in local communities is also crucial for community engagement.

### **Support micro grants to inject cash into projects on the ground**

Micro grants are also a very successful way to support grassroots creative groups and build infrastructure from the ground up. Over the last two years Creative Lives has distributed hundreds of small-scale grants worth between £500-3000 across England, Scotland and Wales. Creative Lives has worked with local councils and the Arts Council England to designate small pots of money to galvanise community activity. Creative Lives has published a report to highlight the community benefits of the Kent, Stoke on Trent, and Cheshire West micro grant schemes, which have collectively enabled 90 local groups and organisations to deliver work on the ground, revitalising community connections and the creative use of existing community assets to increase local opportunities. Creative Lives also ran a successful Micro commission scheme, which sought to reduce isolation during the pandemic – it provided small amounts of money, up to £2000 to enable creative projects to get off the ground and support vulnerable groups through creative initiatives.

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<sup>6</sup> [https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/ART31%20-%20Young%20People%20and%20Arts%20Engagement\\_0.pdf](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/ART31%20-%20Young%20People%20and%20Arts%20Engagement_0.pdf)

***How might changes to the UK's broadcasting landscape affect investment in cultural production outside the capital, and what could the consequences be for artists and communities?***

Creative Lives On Air is our innovative partnership with BBC local radio stations to champion local creative opportunities to listeners, typically from lower socioeconomic groups. Local and community media has the potential to support the marketing and development of local creative endeavours, but investment in schemes such as the Audio Fund need to be in place to stimulate this type of activity.

In 2020 independent research conducted by Nick Ewbank Associates concluded that Creative Lives partnerships with BBC local radio - *“contributed positively to the well-being of isolated people and had the potential to contribute to the process of growing confident and connected communities and improving environments”*. Creative Lives currently has five locally embedded Creative Lives On-Air Producers working across the UK. They work with grassroots organisations to encourage participation in creative activity. They deliver on-air and taster sessions to highlight local creative activity to BBC Local Radio audiences, which can attract up to 200,00 listeners per station.

***How should Government build on existing schemes, such as the UK City of Culture, to level up funding for arts and culture?***

Creative Lives has worked in partnership with schemes such as City of Culture as well as Arts Council England's Creative People and Places initiative. These schemes bring resources and talent to new areas and have had huge success across the country, especially when they involve grassroots and community groups, working from the ground up to enable these opportunities to help communities prosper and build talent locally.

**Summary**

To ensure the community and volunteer-led creative sector plays an active role in the levelling up agenda these groups need:

- Access to appropriate **spaces** - these can be traditional art venues such as theatres and galleries, but also church halls, cafes, pubs, community centres, gardens and businesses. These need to be cost effective, accessible and suitable for local communities to use effectively.
- Support for **creative citizens**, so they can thrive in local communities. This includes volunteers, change makers, but also key staff who work for local councils, media and health services to promote and initiate activity.
- **Recognition and support** – through funding, awards, media coverage – providing accessible and inclusive opportunities for more vulnerable individuals, so groups and activity can be diverse, regular and sustainable.
- To be **valued and understood** as part of the wider creative industries and community **ecosystem**.
- **Local sustained investment via micro grants** can inject cash into projects on the ground, which can have a sustainable impact on local communities
- Mechanisms to ensure **information about local creative opportunities is readily available** to local communities to ensure engagement.