

# Create: Networks

Funding reflections, learning and impact  
of Create:Networks 2024/25

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# Introduction

This report seeks to understand the impact, challenges, and learning associated with the 2024/25 round of the Create:Networks fund. The aim is to share this learning as a resource to inform future support for creative networks, and to contribute to a growing body of knowledge supporting sustainable, inclusive, and connected creative networks across Scotland.

## History and development of Create:Networks

Create:Networks was originally developed in 2019 by Creative Scotland to help organisations, creative businesses or creative practitioners create new, or develop existing, local creative business networks in Scotland. The first iteration was launched in January 2020, and funded the development and programming of four networks over the course of a year. Look Again, based in Aberdeen, were further supported after this first round to deliver Create:Networks North East, supporting seven networks to deliver activity over three months in 2023.

Scotland's Creative Networks have met since 2021 to collaborate, exchange knowledge, share best practice, and collectively advocate. Representatives include CABN, Creative Dundee, Creative Edinburgh, Creative Glasgow, Creative Stirling, DG Unlimited, Look Again Aberdeen and XpoNorth. In late 2023, Creative Scotland (with support from the National Lottery) invited Creative Dundee to lead on developing a proposal with Scotland's Creative Networks to deliver the fund for 2024/25. Creative Dundee led on delivery of Create:Networks 2024/25 with Scotland's Creative Networks supporting the application selection process. Building on the fund's existing framework, Creative Dundee designed the project in line with their values and processes, responsively shaping it over its duration.

## Create:Networks 2024/25

The Create:Networks 2024/25 programme was designed to resource a cohort of new and established local creative networks to build, grow and sustain themselves, alongside accessing a programme of peer-sharing and network development support. Awards were offered at two levels:

- New networks could apply for up to £10,000 of funding per network.
- Established networks could apply for up to £20,000 of funding per network.

Successful applicants were expected to develop a programme which established or further developed a local creative network, supporting broad-based creative business and market development activity. In this way, the network intended to deliver public benefit by helping the participating creative practitioners and businesses to grow and become more sustainable.

The deadline for applications was Monday 5 August 2024. Funded activity was scheduled to begin from Monday 16 September 2024 and was required to be complete by Sunday 31 August 2025. The fund was open to applications from groups, collectives, social enterprises, charities, community interest companies and creative support organisations, cultural and leisure trusts, local authorities and national companies.

## Report methodology and people



This report was designed, researched and written by freelance practitioner [Kathryn Welch](#) in February 2026.

*“I’ve been familiar with the work of Creative Dundee for many years, and have worked alongside them in a number of roles, most notably during our shared involvement in Creative Scotland’s Culture Collective. Through that programme, and my wider work in the creative and community sector, I’ve developed an ongoing interest in the importance, potential, opportunities and impact of creative networks (as well as their challenges and support needs). For all of those reasons, I was delighted to be asked by the Creative Dundee team to lead this programme of enquiry, which was intended from the outset to be independent, constructive and consultative in nature. I’m grateful to [Morvern Cunningham](#) for support with the one-to-one interviews and group workshop, and for their wisdom and contributions throughout this process.”*

This report uses information drawn from a number of sources, which are analysed and presented here together. The main sources of information were:

- Analysis of the existing documentary evidence around the fund. This included reports and documentation from grantees and from Creative Dundee, quantitative analysis about the reach and diversity of applications, and notes from workshops held by Creative Dundee for grantholders.
- In-depth interviews with eight of the funded networks.

- A survey, open to those who applied unsuccessfully to the fund, and to those who did not apply, but whose work resonates with the fund's aims. This attracted 21 responses.
- An online group workshop to which a sample of survey respondents were invited. 14 people were invited to this workshop, and ten people took part on the day.
- Impact 'snapshots', short case studies outlining key impacts of funding for the projects, communities and more widely, were prepared by five of the funded networks.

It is worth noting that those who took part in the one-to-one interviews, the group workshop and impact snapshots were all compensated for their time taking part in this report. The key themes emerging from these sources are presented here, alongside a number of thoughts 'for consideration', which are intended to inform the development of future activity to support creative networks. Impact 'snapshots' from the funded projects are included throughout the report, sharing an insight to key differences this work made for funded organisations, for network members, and more widely.

[A plain text version of this report is available on our website.](#) Two summary papers encapsulating key learning points are [also available to read](#): an Executive Summary, tailored to network investors and enablers (through funding, advocacy, strategy interventions and policy development); and 'This is not an Executive Summary', containing reflections and learning for network builders.



# Theme 1: Practicalities & processes



## Funding applications

Applications to Create:Networks opened in early June 2024 and closed at the beginning of August 2024, attracting 94 applications. The applications represented a total ask of £1,242,928 – 90% beyond the total available funding of £120,000. 49 emerging and 45 established networks applied. Nine networks were awarded funding (a success rate of 9.6%). Four existing networks received an average grant of £17,000 each (lowest £13k, highest £20k) and five new networks received an average grant of £9,900 each (lowest £9.8k, highest £10k). The awarded networks spanned Angus, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Highland, Forth Valley, South Ayrshire and Shetland.

Of the 94 applications received, the Local Authority areas receiving the highest number of applications included Dundee (19 applications), Glasgow (15) and Edinburgh (12). This is likely to be a reflection of population density, a general Central Belt grouping of publicly-funded creative infrastructure, and the local reach and publicity efforts of Creative Dundee. The following local authority areas received no applications (excluding one 'Scotland-wide' application):

- East Ayrshire
- East Renfrewshire
- Inverclyde
- Orkney Islands
- West Dunbartonshire
- West Lothian

Applicants most commonly found out about the fund through Creative Dundee's marketing and networks (22% of applicants) or via word of mouth from a friend or colleague (20% of applicants). 15% of applicants heard about the funding via another network and 14% via Creative Scotland. This highlights both the interconnectedness of the creative sector in Scotland and the importance of relationship-led marketing, as well as reflecting the active efforts taken by Creative Dundee to advertise the opportunity.

At the time of grant award, successful applicants planned to spend the largest portion (40%) of their awarded funds on coordinators. Other significant areas of expected expenditure were activity facilitation and speakers (17%), paid opportunities for creative practitioners (13%) and admin and marketing (9%).

## Defining a 'local' network

Across Scotland, creative networks are deeply rooted in our places, practices and experiences. They act as the glue between communities, local authorities, public agencies and national policymakers. While the majority of applications to Create:Networks 2024/25 proposed that activity would take place within one specific Local Authority area, a request for clarification prompted additional context around the definition of a 'local' network. This was added to an active list of FAQs on Creative Dundee's website that expanded on existing guidance around the definition of a 'local' network:

*“When it comes to networks being ‘local’, applicants should detail that their activity will be targeted to specific places/areas, rather than being undefined by place or open to anyone (i.e. across Scotland). We understand that some proposals will cross local authority areas for good reason and wouldn't want to inhibit projects purely to keep them inside local authority areas – however, proposals will need to specify areas and be clear that activity would be localised.”*

Some potential applicants recognised the need of funding networks in a place-based way, as well as the complexity and challenges associated with local funding. Some applicants called for priority to be given to areas of the country currently attracting lower levels of public funding, whilst others noted that the boundaries of place can be experienced differently 'on the ground' compared to formal place boundaries. Some locally-rooted networks have nodes of valuable connection beyond their place, or operate via a series of places that nourish and inform one-another. There was a recognition of the value of working cross-region, as well as cross-border (with northern England). The value of place-based ways of working were also recognised alongside the other connections that can show up within networks:

*“We wanted to serve in particular [geographic] areas, but equally there is a shared (political, demographic) experience [across our membership]. We have a shared experience as a community that is a huge underserved need. [That 'place-based plus' identity led to a] feeling of “is this for me?” as a funding opportunity.”*



## For consideration:

How can place-based funds embrace the geographic complexity and interconnectedness of local networks? How might networks that operate 'beyond-locally' be supported? Are some places more in need of targeted support than others?

## Applicant experiences

Generally speaking, applicants were content with the funding application process. The forms were felt to be navigable and proportionate, the timeframe reasonable, and the guidance clear: *"I think it struck a fair balance between what was asked of us and what the funding panel required"*. A small number of applicants commented that the process of submitting a budget separately by email (rather than within the main body of the application) was *"a strange extra step"* – one that due to limitations of the platform used for applications (Google Forms does not allow attachments for non-Gmail email addresses).

Creative Dundee's explicit recognition (and appreciation) of the unpaid time and effort that goes into submitting an application was widely appreciated, even by unsuccessful applicants.

For many, the application process promoted useful consideration of their network's future – recognising that it's often difficult to find the time for this 'big picture' thinking on a day to day basis. Many applications prompted new conversations with potential partners or network members, or between those organising the network.

Many successful applicants especially recognised the importance of this application / planning period as they've gone on to deliver their project. It typically acted to move along the development of a strategic and operational plan that stood them in good stead as they delivered their work. Many, however, also took care to note that the flexibility to adapt project plans as they learned more about the needs of their network was vital. Whilst this flexibility was very much supported by Creative Dundee, an extra level of recognition throughout the application (and grant acceptance) period would be appreciated by applicants.



*"It's a very radical fund, so it's quite weird to see the wording of it and know how to respond. How we work is quite organic, DIY, but it's a different headspace to get into that mindset [from] a funder".*

## For consideration:

Future application packs should take care to emphasise that plans mapped out in the application forms are understood to be subject to change, and that flexibility in delivery would be expected and embraced.




## The assessment process

From the application deadline, assessment took place over three weeks. Each application was assessed by three individuals, with Creative Dundee supported by Creative Edinburgh, DG Unlimited and freelance project manager and practitioner, Lynne Hocking. The scale of applications ultimately meant that some projects were unable to be funded despite their clearly identified need. Given the volume of applications received, context of the fund's demand was provided in lieu of individual feedback.

The fund was intended to support networks that were representative of creative communities in locations across Scotland, with ambition to fund up to eight networks. The fund was able to support nine networks due to their accumulated ask, and represent a breadth of geography, communities and creative artforms.

New networks		
Creative Futures (Narture CIC)	South Ayrshire	£10,000
Network Q (Pluto Q CIC)	Glasgow	£9,920
Shetland Textiles Network	Shetland	£9,991
Universal Recognition – Alba Hub	Glasgow	£10,000
Forth Valley Creative Network (Creative Stirling)	Forth Valley	£9,814
Existing networks		
Angus Creatives SCIO	Angus	£13,200
Biome Collective	Dundee	£20,000
CaraVAN (Circus Artspace (trading) / Creative Inverness Limited (legal))	Highlands	£18,604
Neuk Edinburgh (Neuk Collective / Door in the Wall Arts Access CIC)	Edinburgh	£16,950

Whilst (successful and unsuccessful) applicants were generally positive about the application form itself, a smaller number took time to offer more critical feedback about the wider process of application.



*“Seeing the number of applicants after the fund closed did make me realise I should give up on that project and do something less ambitious”.*

*“I thought it would be an annual call out and felt I would be able to provide a stronger application [the following] year”.*

### **For consideration:**

Future funding call outs could certainly make clearer the likelihood (or not) of this funding opportunity being repeated in future years. Narrowing the eligibility criteria (and being as clear as possible about the focus and priorities of the fund) might increase the success rate of applications and reduce the very high numbers (85 of 94 applications) that were unsuccessful.

## **Devolved funding delivery model**

Many applicants noted a positive experience of applying for (and being supported in) funding from Creative Dundee, rather than Creative Scotland. Working with a ‘peer’ network, rather than a formal funding body, reassured applicants that there would be an assumed level of empathy, understanding and support, and reduced the barriers to open and honest conversations. Whilst Creative Dundee themselves recognised that power barriers continue to exist by nature of ‘who holds the money’, a significant factor in lowering these barriers came via the personal and very human approach of the Creative Producer who led the management of the process. Applicants noted repeatedly the kindness, empathy and understanding of their communications, their clear emails, and the balancing of support and reassurance with ‘time and space to get on with it’.

*“Overall, Creative Dundee’s management of Create:Networks felt enabling rather than restrictive, which has been crucial for us”.*

Some respondents considered that Creative Scotland staff, whilst frequently kind and knowledgeable on an individual basis, were not always equipped to respond to applicants with the same kind of approach.

One unsuccessful applicant, however, was strongly critical of the application process. Their perception was that funds may have been awarded (at least partially) on the basis of pre-existing relationships, and felt that *“the funding process lacked transparency and accountability”*. This respondent queried Creative Scotland’s decision to devolve decision-making to Creative Dundee, noting that *“Local authorities would have raised questions [about one successful bid], and it should have involved the [Creative Scotland] place and communities team as well as the creative industries team and the EDI team in reviewing recommendations for funding... We would recommend Creative Scotland explore their role and consider direct funding of the programme in future”*.

### **For consideration:**

The devolved funding model generally worked well in this case, and Creative Dundee’s management of the fund brought a great deal of trust, warmth and empathy to the experience. Future rounds might consider how Creative Scotland’s greater place-based knowledge across Scotland might add context and a different layer of expertise to that of the assessment panel for this round. Useful consideration could be given to including them as part of the assessment team for future rounds.

## **Being awarded funding**

For a number of applicants, Create:Networks funding represented a step up in terms of resource and support. Accordingly, for many applicants funding success also represented validation and recognition of the work they’d been doing.

*“The money helps you realise that what you do is felt to be valuable – it’s otherwise often a really thankless job”.*

*“Importantly, the Create:Networks funding added a perception of legitimacy and value to our brand new network, which we believe has increased interest and buy-in locally”.*

For the individuals at the centre of these networks, there was an initial adjustment period, of ‘getting your head around it’, of moving from the aspirations of a funding application to the realities of delivery, and from a series of quiet, local conversations to a more public recognition of the network. None of these adjustments were unwelcome or insurmountable, but applicants appreciated the extra care and



support offered at this moment. A trusted point of contact at Creative Dundee was important in navigating the practicalities of grant kick-off, of discussing adjustments to delivery plans, and for reassurance and guidance where this was a new process. The initial network meeting for funded projects was appreciated by many – a moment to put faces to names, to begin to come together as a group of funded projects, ask questions, find commonalities and share experiences.

This groundwork is perhaps especially useful given the devolved nature of the funding to Creative Dundee, and of the intentionally flexible nature of the funding. A number of projects mentioned how unusual they found this approach, and that it took time to build the required trust to be open about their project needs. One project requested flexibility to reallocate some grant underspend, and were genuinely shocked when that request was approved. Despite flexibility within the scope of planned activity being a feature of Creative Scotland programmes, there was a perception that this is not the case: “[The approval] was a *bit of a surprise to the group – we’d assumed that it would be a no. The reputation of Creative Scotland is that they would be really strict on not allowing changes. People have that fear of upsetting the funder and getting the funds taken away*”.



### **For consideration:**

This initial moment of support is pivotal, especially for projects being funded for the first time, or at a higher level of support than before. The importance of personal relationships between funder and grant-recipient, the early building of trust to navigate questions, and the bringing together early of grant recipients should all be protected and prioritised again in future support. Explicit and additional clarity should be provided that changes to the detail of delivery and budget allocation are both expected and welcome.

## **Access costs**

A number of funded networks took great care to emphasise that future financial initiatives to support networks should better consider the allocation of access funding in addition to the main project grant. Networks led by disabled people and / or those explicitly seeking to support disabled creatives, reported both that their grants enabled much less activity than for networks with fewer access considerations, and that the high costs of access provision limited their aspirations to provide genuinely accessible provision. Networks noted especially the high costs associated with BSL provision and accessible venue hire, as well as the additional

administrative time associated with programming, communicating and supporting accessible provision. Creating accessible, peer-led networks by and for disabled creatives is a specialist skill that is both much needed and highly valued by participants, and that comes with objectively higher financial costs.

### **For consideration:**

Future financial support for networks should explore how project access costs can be considered separately to project delivery costs, in order both to enable more accessible provision across the board, and to build greater parity for networks led by and for disabled creatives. Other Creative Scotland funding streams allow for personal access costs to be funded separately (and in addition to) activity costs, and a similar approach here would be strongly welcomed.

## **Payment terms**

A number of networks noted that the grant payment schedule (in which a portion of the grant is paid after completion of the project) is problematic for very small projects. This schedule, whilst presumably designed to ensure project completion and reporting, and to account for this being a devolved fund (Creative Dundee themselves were not in receipt of full funds ahead of projects being completed), transfers financial risk from the funder to the project. In many cases, this risk is effectively transferred to the individual(s) working to establish the network, who have significantly fewer resources than the funder, and often little-to-no working cashflow or access to other budget lines. “[This is] a ‘real fear’, ‘big worry’ and complete barrier”.

### **For consideration:**

Grant payment schedules for future funds should recognise the significant precarity that payment after the end of the project creates for very small projects, and offer some flexibility for the smallest projects, organisations and individuals.

## **A one-year funding programme**

Create:Networks offered a one-year programme of support (albeit with some flexibility over the precise timescales of delivery). Many grant recipients described this, rather than the total sum of money awarded, as a limitation of the fund. For networks who aspired to scale, reach new audiences or try new modes of operation with their grant award, one year is simply an unrealistic timeframe to both build this new mode of operation and to become financially sustainable. Many described this



year as 'laying the foundations' or 'building the groundworks' for a more sustainable model, but at the end of the year many find themselves with significant questions remaining about their future trajectory. For others, particularly those working at a slower pace, with limited capacity or in a very new environment, the one year 'deadline' was a source of additional pressure.

*“Longer term, lower intensity funding would be more sustainable. Delivering everything over one year can push you into constant output, rather than allowing relationships to evolve at more of a natural pace”.*

*“For future funds we feel a longer time frame would have benefitted the participants and enabled us a little more breathing space around coordinating the sessions and meet-ups. The tight timescale for delivery – from the requirement to begin soon after having been selected to just shy of one year to finish activity – has negatively impacted the development of the sustainability of the network”.*

### **For consideration:**

Future support for networks should explore more flexible models of support, with varying time periods of funding to reflect the different needs of networks, and different phases of development. There should be clear guidance for those wishing to seek ongoing funding support from Creative Scotland beyond the term of Create:Networks funding.



# Impact Snapshot:

## Creative Futures (Narture CIC)

Tell us about one key impact that Create:Networks support has made...

### ... for you and/or your funded network:

The breathing space it provided for experimentation and growth. The support allowed us to explore new projects and ideas without the pressure of immediate funding constraints, giving us room to take creative risks. Perhaps most importantly, it fostered a strong sense of community, connecting local artists, organisations, and social enterprises to share knowledge, collaborate, and support one another, which has strengthened both our network and the wider creative ecosystem in South Ayrshire.

### ... for the creative practitioners who are part of your network:

Creating a welcoming, supportive space for local creatives to come together. The programme has allowed members to learn new skills, gain contacts, and share experiences in a safe, nurturing environment. Beyond practical support, it has built a real sense of community, helping artists and organisations feel connected, inspired, and confident to explore new ideas together.

### ... beyond your network:

Strengthening Ayr and South Ayrshire's creative ecosystem. By connecting local artists, organisations, and social enterprises, the network has encouraged collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and a culture of mutual support that reaches beyond individual participants. This has helped address wider challenges such as isolation, limited opportunities, and under-resourced creative spaces, creating a more resilient, connected, and visible local creative sector

# Theme 2:

## Establishing, sustaining & growing

### Key milestones for support

Projects were funded at a range of moments in their lifespan – from newly founded networks, to those marking milestone anniversaries, to those facing new challenges or opportunities. Whilst many pragmatically recognised that the opportunity to apply for Create:Networks funding could be useful at many moments in a network’s development, projects also recognised the importance of aligning the opportunity of funding with sufficient internal capacity to make the most of the opportunity, and an environment in which to pursue the new initiatives that come with funding. One successful applicant reflected that applying a few years earlier would have been difficult in terms of having the capacity to deliver on the funding plans: *“[Getting funding 2 years earlier] would have been really stressful. [That was] a period of utter chaos and stress, utter firefighting. I don’t think we would have been quite ready”*.

One interviewee chose not to apply to Create:Networks in 2024, in recognition that they would be in a better position to deliver a step-up in their network’s plans in 2025–26 (then was dismayed to discover later that Create:Networks is not always an annual opportunity).

### For consideration:

Clarity and predictability to applicants around funding cycles (is Create:Networks a one-off fund, an annual opportunity, or something else?) would allow applicants to better plan their applications to align with the moments of greatest opportunity for their network. One-off, occasional or pilot funds all have their place, but the demand for this fund – and the impact of the funded projects – should prompt greater consideration of the need for consistent, regular funding for this sort of work.

### Breathing space, space to experiment

Networks recognised that growing and innovating is not always practical or necessary, sometimes *“just keeping going is an achievement”*. For networks that have already invested significant time into ‘just keeping going’, one of the main

benefits of receiving funding was the opportunity for some ‘breathing space’ – a chance to reflect, to consider what next, and to bring a more considered approach to their next phase of development.

*“We had to undertake so much campaign work this year – without the fund this would have burnt us out to an extent that the [network] and its activities would likely have completely halted or ceased to be”.*

For most networks, the processes of growth involve learning and delivering at the same time – using the fruits of activity to inform and nourish next steps in a process of co-creation alongside network members.

*“Not just networks, but [for] organisations [more] generally, I wish funding allowed you to be more responsive because the world is constantly changing, and the people you're working with are constantly changing in response to the changes around them. So you are learning constantly. We're in a constant state of learning new information and new ways of doing things, and if your funding isn't responsive, you're not going to see organisations develop in terms of things like access or inclusion, because those are processes... it is going to be a process of trying things out and seeing what works.”*

For new networks, this may be preceded by a period of consultation, research and / or development, although this phase too was usually carried out ‘in the open’ alongside a community or potential network members. This typically necessitates a vulnerable and humble way of working – a willingness to learn from others, to recognise where you might not know the answers, and to be ready to adapt and change depending on what you learn. This isn’t always easy, and can be open to critique by others who are accustomed to a more hierarchical, pre-determined way of working. And it requires a degree of trust and investment from the community, who might be asked to support a network before there is a clear idea of exactly what that network might look like. Nonetheless, networks typically had enthusiastic take-up from their communities, and a great deal of buy-in to shaping a future network offer. More established networks continued to recognise the need for flexibility and adaptability, and an openness to pivot to offer what your network needs, as those needs change over time.

*“I like being adaptive and flexible...that is something we can do – get information out to people quickly and coordinate a response. So y’know, if something comes in and it really speaks to us, then it’s like bang, we can do that – as long as we have enough headspace to take it on”.*

*“I think there is something specifically about the flexibility of funding in the transition points, because the transition points are inherently a time of uncertainty. You don’t quite know how things are going to work out, and being able to try things and be like, ‘Okay, this isn’t working, let’s try something else’; that’s been really helpful”*



This adaptability is not always a straightforward or linear process. Many networks noted that what community members say they’d like to see is not always reflected in the actual attendance numbers across different types of activity. Occasionally much-requested activity turned out to be unpopular or received mixed-reviews in practice, or provision that was championed by parts of a network could be inaccessible or critiqued by others. Many networks showed a great deal of skill in navigating these complex processes of consultation and adaptability, being led by the ethics and values of the network, a consideration of the demands of accessibility and inclusion in practice, and a pragmatism in learning (and re-learning) from practice in an ongoing process of network refinement.

### **For consideration:**

How could these processes of necessary uncertainty and adaptability be more explicitly built into the funding process? Future funds could consider how networks can be supported (financially and otherwise) on a sustainable, ongoing basis, not just at moments of launch or change.

## **Aspirations vs realities**

Create:Networks-funded projects typically delivered the vast majority of the work they outlined in their application forms. Where adjustments were made, this was done as part of a process of learning and evolving as the needs of the community became clearer, and plans were adjusted to better meet those needs. Projects were grateful for the opportunity to adjust their delivery plans as these needs became clearer, and for the support and understanding of Creative Dundee throughout that process.

Many projects streamlined their plans a little from the application stage – ultimately delivering a slightly tighter programme of activity, and investing more into each of these activities (rather than spreading the jam more thinly over multiple programme activities). Where organisations ran into timing and capacity constraints as the year progressed, they typically decided to do fewer things better, rather than run more activities simply because that aligned with their original plans.

In many cases, applicants had under-estimated the amount of support that community members would need to fully engage with a programme of activity (as well as, in a number of cases, the high costs of accessible venues, which were noted across multiple network reports). A number of newer networks felt that they had under-estimated the level of administrative support that would be required, and one network that chose not to hire a paid programme coordinator reflected that “*in hindsight that was a big mistake. We spent a lot of time struggling with logistics*”. Where networks delivered less activity than planned, this was almost always the result of seeking to serve their community better.

### **For consideration:**

Could future funding programmes share the learning of this cohort by way of helping future applicants to consider their budgeting needs? Might budget allocations remain flexible to meet the needs of networks, whilst still passing on learning in terms of “this is what has(n’t) worked well in the past”?

## **Disabled creatives, and working with different capacities**



Whilst the funding for networks was set at two levels (for new and developing networks), some networks highlighted the very different capacities that existed within networks, and the different levels of delivery that were accordingly feasible. For networks led by and for disabled creatives, or those working with people facing multiple kinds of exclusion from the workplace, high levels of input and support were needed to enable networks to grow, whilst simultaneously being led by organisers whose own capacities were much reduced.

*“We had less health capacity collectively and faced more everyday infrastructural barriers that disable our capacity to push through activities that did not meet our pacing and scheduling needs. It was essential for our*

*membership to rest and pace in order to keep safe and well. In other words, a year to undertake these typical activities – which might have been achievable for a non disabled network – were not achievable in this time frame for our disabled network”.*

In some cases, this was a challenge to be overcome (such as by recruiting volunteers with more capacity, whilst retaining paid and leadership roles for disabled creatives). In other cases, though, this was experienced as a societal problem rather than (or perhaps, that created) a problem for the disabled creatives themselves. Working more slowly, in patches of available capacity, and designing structures for those not able to engage with more traditional models was actually a strength of some networks, and enabled more flexible, accessible participation by those the network was designed for. Here, the issue is not so much about reduced capacity, and more about how the fixed structures of funding can recognise, adapt to and flexibly support different ways of working.

### **For consideration:**

How could future funding structures explicitly recognise and be supportive of these different ways of working? How might the experiences of disabled-led networks inform more flexible funding structures that could be of wider benefit in enabling sustainable working practices?


## **Conflict, cliques and diversity**



Given the importance that networks place on the interpersonal, it's perhaps unsurprising that relationships and connections are sometimes a challenge, too. Networks were conscious of the tendency to build networks of 'other people like us' – sometimes this was a benefit (in building networks that were by and for disabled or working class creatives, for example) and other times was a challenge to be overcome (in improving access, avoiding cliques and widening representation). The intended membership of some networks was very niche, others much broader, and both have their place, and their associated advantages and challenges.

In networks that have a broad intended membership, it's typical that not all creatives will find it equally easy to participate. There can be easier access for those with more free time, those who live centrally and can easily travel, folk who are confident in social situations and who see themselves represented amongst the visible leadership of the network. Those in the early stages of their creative careers

may be more primed to seek out and ask for support from networks, although there can be an underconfidence in their 'qualification' to be part of a creative network, too. These challenges were widely acknowledged by funded networks, often on an ongoing basis:



*“People face massive barriers and difficulties, it's unrealistic to think they'll be able to access a general network that's open 'to all' – we need to be much more proactive”.*

*“You think 'I'm different from everyone there, they're not interested in people like me', so you don't go back”.*

*“It can sometimes feel hard to break into existing cliques or subcultures. This is especially true when it comes to social anxiety and/or neurodivergence – members have expressed trying to go to other networking or social activities and feeling like they don't know what the unwritten rules of engagement are or how to initiate”.*

Since networks are heavily shaped by the needs and opportunities of their membership, this can quickly become a self-perpetuating cycle. If a network's initial membership pool is only partially representative of a wider community of creatives, the network offer can quickly become tailored to the needs of this pool. Over time, this risks unintentionally creating a network that better serves some members of its community than others. In these cases, seeking to attract different kinds of members to an established group is often a challenge – prospective new members don't see themselves reflected within the group, and may want a different kind of provision to that being offered. In these cases, networks offered a number of different responses:

- Not all networks need to be for everyone. In some cases, the offer of support to establish new networks may enable an ecosystem of more specialist networks to happily coexist within one geographic area.
- Investing in long-term partnerships, built from a genuine spirit of collaboration, is more likely to be successful than short-term initiatives to attract new members.
- Be wary of requiring people to volunteer to access opportunities, or consulting or recruiting for new opportunities from only within the existing

pool of members. Open advertisements provide a fairer and more inclusive opportunity for new people to shape a network's provision.

**For consideration:**

A mix of general and more specifically-tailored networks appeared to work well here in balancing breadth of opportunity with accessible, tailored networks. How might the expertise of networks that focus on particular kinds of accessible support be more widely shared with more generalist networks? Could the allocation of funding in future rounds consider the balance of niche to generalist networks, alongside the criteria of new / established networks, and geographic distribution.



# Impact Snapshot: Universal Recognition – Alba Hub

**Tell us about one key impact that Create:Networks support has made...**

**... for you and/or your funded network:**

Whilst working on design projects with partner organisations, I noticed that a disabled led network with great creative potential for social transformation was emerging. This was matched with frustration however as I didn't have the material means (as a disabled creative living with financial precarity) to take risks and explore this network as its own project. Create:Networks completely transformed the terrain: it enabled me the financial security needed to creatively labour, nourish and germinate Universal Recognition (UR) into a blossoming reality in and of itself. This personal security enabled UR to take root, this felt hopeful and truly liberating.

**... for the creative practitioners who are part of your network:**

Create:Networks enabled UR to exist where it otherwise couldn't, fulfilling significant community need. Many of our disabled creatives wanted to participate in accessibility and service-design but were experiencing significant disenfranchisement due to societal barriers. Create:Networks enabled UR to hold a monthly programme of peer-to-peer support workshops that responded collectively and creatively to the challenges our community was facing. Where folks before had no support they now had a network of people with 'shared understanding' which offered them 'connection' and 'collective power'. Folks described UR as 'a bridge between us (disabled folks) and the mainland (non-disabled people's professional and social world)'

**... beyond your network:**

The enabling of diverse collective strength that has the potential to foster meaningful change. Create:Networks provides day-to-day stability for diverse networks to seed, grow and rise up together. This stability nourishes our collective opportunities and action. Through working on these opportunities and programmes within our networks our diverse impacts became connected and visible to each other. This collective connection and visibility helped bring about much needed feelings of hope and furthered our action. We continue to work meaningfully together with networks that we met through Create:Networks. Together there is the potential for active change and collective liberation.

# Theme 3:

## Leadership of networks



### Skills development and capacity building

Scotland's creative and cultural sector is characterised by freelancers, micro-businesses and early-stage SMEs. Scotland's Creative Industries are defined by micro-businesses: 97% of registered enterprises have fewer than 50 employees (SG Creative Industries Sector Briefing, March 2026), and they require networked support rather than conventional, transaction-based business advice. Creative networks enable connection and collaboration between hundreds of small creative businesses who otherwise operate in isolation. This learning and knowledge sharing infrastructure is essential in a sector where informal supply chains dominate, and innovation depends on peer-to-peer exchange rather than scale alone.

Creative networks are typically begun by an individual or small group of makers with a desire to bring people together and connect with others. As networks grow, the infrastructure they need to sustain and thrive may require a very broad range of skills – from conflict resolution, diplomacy and facilitation to website building, financial management, policy development, funding application writing and strategic thinking. Unsurprisingly, even the most competent and able network coordinators frequently find themselves both overloaded and working at the edges of their skill sets. Coordinators often noted the high workloads required to do this kind of work well – to curate and hold a network that is responsive, communicative, supportive and appealing. Much of this labour is invisible, and often unpaid – writing funding applications, administering events, making time for a chat or helping others to navigate the unwritten rules of a creative practice. There typically isn't a 'scaled down' version of a network that is low maintenance to run; these values (and hence this level of workload) are simply considered integral to the running of an effective network: *"The 'how we work' is as important as the 'what we do'"*.

In these circumstances, support can usefully take a number of forms. Many networks found Create:Networks funding vital in simply paying for the time of key coordinator or administrator roles – either allowing these tasks to be outsourced or enabling the existing coordinators to prioritise their time in these roles (rather than

'fitting them in' around other paying work). Similarly, funding was frequently used to pay members of the network to fulfil key tasks (such as design or web development). This played equally-useful roles in distributing funding across the network, enabling the network to benefit from more people's skills, and offering an easy way for more people to find a way into network leadership roles.

## Paid staff and volunteers

Many of the pre-existing networks funded by the Create:Networks programme had been founded by volunteers before transitioning to a more mixed economy of volunteers and staff; all of the networks relied to a significant extent on the contribution of unpaid work in some form. A common model used Create:Networks funding to pay for an administrator or coordinator post, supported by a wider team of volunteers. In some cases, this model worked reasonably well – the paid staff were able to deliver a good deal of the practical activity of the network, leaving the volunteers to take a more advisory role. Other tensions, however, included:



- That funding for staff roles rarely covered the level of workload required, leaving key people contributing significantly unpaid work alongside their paid time. *"The money for salaries is almost like a gesture compared to how much you're actually working"*.
- That it can be very difficult to deliver a model that relies on significant volunteer input, especially where the network is formed by or for those who are already experiencing poverty, inequalities, or other barriers to the workforce. In some cases, this raised ethical questions about the possibilities of asking network members to contribute their time for free. *"I find it really awful to ask our [members] to do things voluntarily because I know the precarity of their financial circumstances"*. In others, it simply transfers unsustainable workloads onto very small numbers of staff: *"I can't ask people to give their time for free. So if I can't ask them to take their time, then I end up having to do it. And so, my time just becomes completely consumed"*.
- The power dynamics between paid staff and volunteers, and funding leading to a shift in expectations over who makes decisions and who does (and doesn't do) which tasks.
- The usefulness of funding in being able to offer (usually small-scale) paid roles to network members, thereby easing them into a role with greater leadership potential whilst contributing to the costs of their time. This can,

however, be challenging if funding is not available long-term and those roles need to shift back to volunteer positions.

- The expectation that people will (or should) develop creative networks from a sense of goodwill, rather than seeing these roles as skilled and valid career options. “[*There is*] a lack of economic and professional progression for people running and sustaining networks”.
- The power dynamics involved in being the ‘beneficiary’ of someone else’s volunteering, and the desire to avoid a ‘charitable’ model of service delivery in favour of a network run by and for the community it serves: “*We couldn’t volunteer for this in the same way [as non-disabled creatives might], and you don’t want to be the beneficiaries of someone else volunteering to run something for you*”.
- The irony of volunteering one’s time to progress the cause of fair, sustainable careers in the arts: “*I’ve already undertaken some voluntary work to develop the proposal. There will undoubtedly be plenty more voluntary and unpaid work to sustain the network. I have no intention of undertaking months of unpaid work (and demanding the same of others) to develop a network which evidences the need to support freelancers*”.

### For consideration:

How could the fund better support applicants with setting up models for running a network? Future funds could consider offering guidance on Fair Work, or offer advice on sustainable models and the reality of the scale of work involved with running a network, while ensuring ambition in an application aligns with a proposed budget.

## Burnout and care

“*[You need to] give, but not give everything*”



Evident amongst funded networks was the personal investment that network coordinators bring to their role, and the importance of personal relationships to the network they support. This can frequently go beyond the practicalities of a ‘professional network’, and connect with personal and life circumstances, mental health, politics and world events. As such, network coordinators described their role variously in terms of stewardship, pastoral care, emotional labour, or as a support worker. These weren’t necessarily negative descriptions or unwelcome roles, and shine a light on the infrastructures of trust and care at the heart of a network. Those

roles do, however, ask a lot of the (often already overstretched) individuals in these coordinating roles.

*“It was very heavy, very difficult stuff”.*

*“It often comes down to the same 2 or 3 people who have all the weight on their shoulders”*

*“I think some of it is being able to recognise what is and what isn't something for us to deal with. So I think it is important to be able to respond sensitively and with empathy, if someone is in a vulnerable place or sharing something with you, but also not going into trying to fix that because we are not a mental health support charity”.*

### **For consideration:**

Networks who work extensively with those experiencing marginalisation or trauma are typically exposed to more of this very challenging pastoral role. In these cases, funding for specialist support and supervision has sometimes been helpful – to support those in network coordination roles and / or to support the setting of boundaries and the provision of a wider network of support. A shared pool of trusted referral sources (for network coordinators and / or those they support) could be useful, as could advice made available on a peer-support basis between networks experiencing similar challenges (though again, resources would need to be made available for this sharing of expertise). Creative Scotland and SCVO's HR for Creatives offers resources for employers working in the creative sector, which could support some of this ask.

## **The value of leadership**



*“When I applied to this fund, I imagined I would be doing a lot of work to put structures in place around which people would build community with one another – I wildly underestimated how deeply rooted I would become in that community myself”.*

Whilst many network coordinators were conscious of the challenges and hurdles associated with their roles, it's worth highlighting that there were also regular mentions of how rewarding and fulfilling the roles can be. Those leading networks reported growing their own personal networks, becoming more visible in their role,

developing new skills, accessing different opportunities, being recognised as advocates or experts, and seeing a new side to their own potential. Creative networks are critical yet often invisible forms of everyday cultural infrastructure, and support from Create:Networks brought credibility and visibility to funded projects, as well as offering financial support.

Many of those at the heart of networks reflected on the leadership skills they'd needed, used and developed along the way. This sort of distributed, facilitative, non-hierarchical leadership is under-recognised and not well supported, compounding the experiences of stress and burnout experienced by many of those in this project. Many network leaders saw the potential benefit of accessible (or co-developing) support for leaders in these sorts of roles. Clore Leadership was mentioned by some (although was felt to be out of reach for many), as was a programme formerly run by Creative & Cultural Skills (though this was targeted at organisational, not individual or project-based leaders).

*“Could Create:Networks deliver a national leadership programme for creative individuals who want to make a difference?”*



### **For consideration:**

How might a programme of support be developed that recognises the skills used (and developed) by network leaders, and seeks to support these skills outside the usual context of formal, organisational leadership? Might a cohort of network leaders be recognised for their expertise, access support to continue their own development, and offer guidance to others? How could this sort of leadership support be resourced and could it sit alongside the financial grants offered by Create:Networks?

## **Succession planning**

A very common experience saw the founders or key personnel within networks shouldering a heavy load – both in terms of practical delivery and in holding knowledge about the network. As time goes on, these individuals often become weary or burnt out, or simply wish to explore other opportunities in their lives or work. This creates precarity for networks, who often experience challenges in finding new organisers to come forward, to fill the very large shoes of founder-organisers, and / or to take on what has often by then become unsustainable workloads.

### **For consideration:**

This is a common experience across voluntary-led groups, with significant learning already gathered by support organisations such as [Volunteer Scotland](#) and [Creative Lives](#). Future initiatives to support networks could benefit from collaboration with such organisations to support networks in navigating succession planning and volunteer burnout.



# Impact Snapshot:

## Biome Collective

**Tell us about one key impact that Create:Networks support has made...**

**... for you and/or your funded network:**

The support gave us protected time and resource to strengthen how we run the organisation and support the wider community. We have started to shift from reactive delivery to planned delivery. We have also started to clarify roles, decision making, and where responsibility sits. We are re-scoping budgeting and forecasting to better serve our community. We are also setting clearer priorities and have stopped trying to do everything at once. This shift is improving the business structure with options for change explored in order to position ourselves to operate as a sustainable creative organisation.

**... for the creative practitioners who are part of your network:**

The key impact is increased strategic focus for practitioners, supported by a wider and more connected peer network. The support improved the way creative practitioners see themselves as community members and how they act and contribute. Members moved from isolated wandering to walking a shared path exploring digital creative practice.

**... beyond your network:**

The support helped address a known gap in entry level and early stage support for people exploring games and digital art as a creative practice. We have started to explore how best to point the wider community to the network and how to help them be part of it. This matters for people who have ideas and talent but lack access to networks, feedback, and sector knowledge.

# Theme 4:

## Connecting networks

### Support, community and solidarity between networks

The projects funded by Create:Networks were brought together online at the start and the end of the funded period, and for two additional learning sessions during the funded year. Projects found there to be value in being part of a community of funded networks, and some had continued their connections independently beyond these sessions. Reasons that this sense of community was felt to be valuable included a space to ask questions, to share knowledge, to learn to navigate the fund itself, to find solidarity with challenges (either the challenges experienced within a network, or in navigating the wider climate) and in tackling the isolation in figuring things out alone. Networks were able to offer each other both practical support and a sense of community, empathy and solidarity.

*“Where before we’re feeling these impacts in isolation we are now able to offer some solidarity and respond as a network. The [external] barriers have been unexplainably tough for obvious reasons but also the funding is completely transformative. We are no longer working completely alone. We can consistently meet and work together.”*

Networks recognised that the benefits of this mutual aid were limited in practice by the relatively small amount of time that the projects spent together, and that this in turn was limited by their capacity for networking to be delivered alongside a busy and often pressured programme of individual activity.

*“I wish there’d been more check-ins throughout, to see how things were going and more opportunity to discuss with the other projects. You’re doubting yourself if the experience you’re having is how the other projects are finding it”.*



*“[With this project] we were just under pressure to get it going, get it recruited, get it delivered, you know, so we never managed to follow up with the rest [of the funded networks]. In some ways we felt we had too much to*

*get on and do, so it might have been additional pressure to try and come together [with the other funded projects] but I think there's definitely value in that. There's more we could have learned from others".*

### **For consideration:**

The potential impact of this shared network could be increased by funding over longer time periods (to allow more time for relationships to grow), by allocating funding specifically to network-building activities, and by offering flexible support for the networks to spend time together in smaller groups or to pursue joint learning opportunities.

## **Shared infrastructure support**

Many networks experienced challenges around the infrastructure, systems and processes that underpin a network. Not only were these issues experienced in similar ways across the network, they also absorbed a huge amount of time and energy.

*"This year has been about trying to professionalise...I didn't realise how crucial and critical admin would be. There are a lot of conflicting opinions - it's all really draining".*

*"When you get something off the ground it's a really hard to mouth existence. You get to a certain momentum, with a certain amount of money... the old systems don't work but you can't afford the new ones"*

Practical and infrastructure-based challenges were experienced around:

- HR, contracts and staff employment
- Handbooks, systems and processes
- Incorporation, registration and constitution
- Governance
- Bank accounts, accounting, financial management
- Website development and digital tools
- Branding and marketing
- Membership models and membership management systems
- Future growth and transition points – planning ahead



Networks typically begin with very DIY, analogue and / or free systems which eventually become unwieldy – either practically or ethically. As networks start to look at this process of professionalisation, many discover that traditional legal and governance structures don't lend themselves terribly well to the network context. They often require risk and responsibility to sit with a very small number of individuals, are designed around hierarchical processes of management, are very expensive, labour-intensive and / or don't align with the ethical discussions around responsibility and care that are at the heart of many networks' ethos.



*“Historically we’ve always resisted being an organisation or a charity, because we were in it because we wanted to deliver the projects that we love doing, and not to have the pressure of employing people and excessive paperwork. And so there’s an assumption that you would always want to grow, and I don’t necessarily think that’s us, but I don’t know”.*

*“[It is] easiest to access funding as an incorporated organisation. Does this inhibit natural growth and development of networks? [There is] a rush to incorporate”*

### **For consideration:**

A future fund could usefully support and facilitate a series of practical workshops with experts on the topics above, and / or the development of toolkits, templates, resources and shared systems. These should explicitly focus on tailoring such structures to suit the devolved ethical and logistical experiences of networks, including experts that are familiar with navigating volunteering and leadership by marginalised groups. Where networks are asked to contribute their expertise to such workshops, they should be paid for their time in doing so. Opening these resources to networks beyond those directly funded could be of benefit to the wider ecosystem, too.

## **Training fatigue**

*“I’ve had lots of advice, lots of training. I just need time, and in order to get time I need funding.”*

In championing learning and knowledge-sharing opportunities, we are very conscious (and empathise with) the quote above, shared by one survey respondent.

It is important to recognise that networks – and people leading networks – are typically sources of expertise and have a great deal of knowledge about both their network and the process of building and sustaining a network. This knowledge is highly valuable (both to their own networks, and potentially to others), but to see knowledge-sharing as a free or cheap initiative is to miss the barriers and growing sense of weariness from network leaders who are already over-stretched and under-resourced. This is not to suggest that (thoughtful, carefully tailored) training for networks is not helpful, but rather to recognise that the capacity to either participate in training, or to share learning, is something that needs to be specifically resourced for those who already give so much of their energy to the day to day running of a network.



*“[One challenge with sharing learning is] fatigue? I feel like I'm putting in a lot more knowledge than I get out!”*

### **For consideration:**

Whilst opportunities to share information were eagerly welcomed by many of our respondents, any such initiative should recognise the time it takes to contribute to such initiatives (and consider the financial cost of this time), respect the value of the expertise that exists within networks, and consider that making time to learn and share is typically only feasible when some level of financial security has already been achieved. Relatively small amounts of money can be transformational in recognising the costs of contributing to learning initiatives, valuing the time and expertise of people not in salaried roles, and widening opportunities to take part.

## **Competition between networks**

Participants in our discussion group noted the typically fluid and flexible nature of creative networks. Individuals are often part of multiple networks (according to their geography, artform, demographics etc) and move fluidly between them, sharing information, learning and cross-fertilising knowledge as they go. Similarly, small-scale networks may collaborate, run joint activity, or even merge. These organic processes are altered by funding – in good ways and bad. Increased resources may increase capacity for networks to spend time learning from one-another, or provide opportunity for resourcing partnerships. Conversely, though, funding may create (actual or perceived) barriers. Funding opportunities typically struggle to recognise the unbounded, fluid quality of networks, and in awarding money to one network over another (particularly within a geographic

area) may create or exacerbate a sense of competition between networks. In doing so, funding may 'solidify' the boundaries between networks, raising new questions between networks about who-owns-what, who-does-what, and which 'turf' belongs to which network.



*“What is the best way to fund networks? Nationally? Locally? By third sectors? Is each network funded on its own merit, or do we aim to create a complementary programme of networks?”*

*“I am conscious of duplication within a small city, we don't want to reinvent the wheel or compete with other similar projects. We would like this work to be complimentary to other networks and I want to have a better understanding of work currently happening”.*

*“A new network was funded in our area, but that new network duplicates our network and a complimentary one hosted by one of our partners. The 'new' applicant was a partner in our area so a member of the existing network”.*

Similarly, competition may exist between members of the same network (for work opportunities, for example), and networks here had carved out valuable space that recognised this reality whilst still enabling collaborative approaches. One network, for example, had collaborated with local businesses to increase the total number of work opportunities available, whilst encouraging network members to reflect (union) minimum pay rates in their quotes to avoid undercutting one-another or suppressing fair rates of pay.

### **For consideration:**

Future funding could more carefully explore mechanisms to enable collaboration and resource sharing between networks, recognising that a healthy creative ecology may best be nourished in places where collaboration is recognised, enabled and supported. As the recent [independent review of Creative Scotland](#) places increased emphasis on funding in a place-based manner, and on relationships, partnerships and collaboration, the learning from Create:Networks is well-positioned to inform a nuanced discussion about the role of funding in creating or overcoming barriers between organisations, and in investing in the wider creative ecosystem of a place.

# Impact Snapshot: Shetland Textiles Network

**Tell us about one key impact that Create:Networks support has made...**

**... for you and/or your funded network:**

The Create:Networks funding was essential to allow the Shetland Textiles Network to get started. The funding enabled the network to employ a project manager and to undertake an in-depth scoping report on the textile industry in Shetland.

**... for the creative practitioners who are part of your network:**

The funding allowed the network to organise multiple events which were open to the entire textile community in Shetland and were free of charge. This meant that any practitioners who were interested could come along and contribute to the events and the initial research for the scoping report either in-person or, for some events, online. It was really important that a wide range of voices were heard and fed into the report.

**... beyond your network:**

It's still early days for Shetland Textiles Network but we are hoping that the solid groundwork that the funding allowed us to do in the first 12 months will result in support and promotion for the textile industry into the future.

## Theme 5: Sustainability in practice

### “The road behind us is littered with the corpses of well-meaning networks”

Sustainability for networks is not easily achieved. The personal investment from individuals that often typifies the early days of networks frequently leads to burnout and succession issues, whilst a devolved and distributed leadership model can be less robust in the face of personnel changes compared to more traditional and hierarchical organisational structures. The challenge, then, is not to force networks into these structures (which come with no shortage of problems of their own), but rather to support networks to explore alternative structures of (financial and wider) sustainability. To a large extent, this is the ambition of Create:Networks. The challenge, here, is that funding individual networks at a relatively small scale and over a very limited time period is likely to be only partially successful in achieving sustainability within a system that remains designed with those more traditional organisational structures in mind.

*“[Financial sustainability] is important, but making it the be-all and end-all of this fund is a bit to the detriment of the overall possibility of the fund”.*

Whilst one-off, one-year funding has certainly supported individual networks to explore and test new models of working, a complementary and broader question remains about the wider legal, economic, practical, funding landscape in which these networks are required to operate.

#### For consideration:

A future Create:Networks fund could explore a two-pronged approach, in which individual networks are funded alongside a broader programme of support that exists to explore, challenge and navigate the structures within which networks operate, and to advocate for a more sustainable climate in which they might more easily thrive.



## Scale of ambition

Whilst Create:Networks-funded networks operate within the geography of place (sometimes within a highly localised area, and / or with very specific demographics) it would be a mistake to assume their ambition or horizons are similarly constrained. A number of networks were founded from, and operate toward, radical (re)imaginings of the world, and all – to a greater or lesser extent – are intimately connected with the wider economic, political, social and environmental context. As such, their local and interpersonal activity is frequently designed with much wider strategic change in mind. Examples within the network point to user-led systems design, financial and economic restructuring, welfare reform, LGBTQ+ rights and non-hierarchical, anti-capitalist organising methods.

As such, whilst the Create:Networks grants are relatively modest, and many of the networks operate at a small scale, there is significant knowledge, learning and possibility held within the network.

### For consideration:

The small scale of funding, and the local operation of the funded networks, should not deter Create:Networks from informing and advocating for much wider structural change. This remit would require separate resource, but could support the wider financial sustainability ambitions of the fund by more explicitly connecting the local work of networks with the wider socio-political-economic landscape in which they operate.

## The possibilities and limits of financial sustainability



Networks typically recognised the benefits of financial sustainability – to provide a reliable source of income and to offer independence to adjust their offer to meet the needs of their network. Some networks aspired to achieve this by growing a (paid) membership model, others by developing a (paid) service offer, other by growing a market for goods and services alongside their core network activity.

*“We were able to research co-working models, digital infrastructure, and membership structures, clarifying the organisational systems required for a resilient, self-sustaining network”.*

Where networks have a wide community of creatives who are willing and able to pay for membership, this offers the most straightforward route to financial sustainability. Where this isn't the case, networks have to be more creative, more ambitious, or more innovative in their financial models, and this usually requires greater input and work from the network coordinators, too. Some networks, for example, were looking at splitting out their governance to recognise a profit making arm (registered as a SCIO or similar) from a charitable or voluntary arm (for the network). The challenge of such dual models is that they always require more admin, more structures and more governance, but without providing any of the additional resources to manage such systems.

### **For consideration:**

Some networks have a clear route to financial sustainability, and / or have opportunities for a mixed economy of grants alongside earned income, private fundraising and so on. In this, networks largely echo the wider arts ecosystem, where some parts of the sector will always be more reliant on long-term public support, whilst others only need funding at key moments along the way. *“You’ll always need that bag of seeds at the start and at various points, but the goal is to be sustainable”*. Future Create:Networks rounds could consider which kinds of networks it is best placed to fund, and what funding opportunities are available to networks for whom self-generated income is less realistic.

## **Paid vs free membership**

In considering financial sustainability, all of the funded networks were aware of the traditional membership model of a network that pays membership fees, thus building a stable financial base to support the central costs. Some networks were using or actively exploring this model. Others, though, were conscious of the (in)ability of (some) network members to pay, and the associated risks of creating barriers for some members, building a financially segregated model, or of financial sustainability acting counter to the ethics of the network (where, for example, the network exists specifically to tackle financial inequalities). In such circumstances, financial sustainability is significantly harder to achieve, with fewer 'tried and tested' alternative models from which to draw. A number of networks were tackling this question head on, building and experimenting with alternative financial models. Whilst many of these have promise, it is a hard ask to grow a network, create an alternative financial model, and become self-sustaining within one year of funding.



*“Without the Create:Networks grant, we simply would not have survived the delays of our renovations and precarity of trying to open and establish a new venue on principles of mutual support and anti-capitalism. We would have been forced to charge fees for venue use and support work, and, while we might have been able to build a network of marginalised creative freelancers in this way, we would have been excluding a significant portion of the community”.*



## More than funding

Whilst funding is a key factor in supporting the long-term sustainability of networks, other support can be pivotal too. We asked networks who were not funded by Create:Network to consider a world in which ‘sufficient funding’ (we left this definition intentionally ambiguous) was available to support networks. In this context, we asked them what else would be important in providing an accessible, impactful programme of support for creative networks.

Some responses explored the practicalities of the application and awards process:

- Make the funding applications peer reviewed.
- Geographic equity to ensure that all areas of Scotland have strong creative networks, regardless of population density.
- Applying for funding should be a two-way conversation. Normalise posting online how many applications a fund has received, so people know their chances.

But the highest number of responses explored the importance and potential of network-building between networks, and between networks and wider support agencies:

- That creative networks exchange information and visit each other to ensure opportunity and connection.
- Other sectors, support agencies (networks) including Business Gateway, Tech Scaler, Third sector interface, Climate Hubs, Community Development Trust Association etc have an interface with creative networks.
- Support with best practices and how to ensure sustainability of a network. Facilitating connection and collaboration between networks.
- Mentorship by established networks to support knowledge exchange and reduce duplication

- Provide opportunities/ platform for all creative networks to skill share together and [ensure] that freelance artists are paid for their time to attend these
- Both regional hubs and the country-wide industry need a reinforced community structure which facilitates knowledge and skill sharing.
- The key to our vision is connection – we would value the opportunity to collaborate and/or consult with other hubs.

Recommendations for embedding these ambitions align with the explorations under theme 4: Connecting networks.

## The multiplier effect of creative networks

An important element of sustainability considers the impact of Create:Network activity beyond that directly funded and delivered by the nine networks. Many projects offered examples of this kind of ‘virtuous circle’, where the investment in a network has spawned creative activity beyond the directly funded activity.

Examples include:

- Attendees going on to form their own (more focussed) networks: *“One of the rural events has hopefully sparked/reignited a local network there”.*
- People who meet via network activity going on to initiate their own collaborations, projects and partnerships: *“It’s been wonderful to see professional and social connections forming between the artists – people arranging to collaborate on projects, exhibiting together, and helping each other out.”*
- Networks acting to connect and enable people to lead projects with a greater focus on those who might be less likely to be represented in existing provision: *“The facilitated social and professional networking from the [network] events has led to new connections and collaborations between marginalised artists and therefore the development of new projects with multiple marginalised identities at the helm”.*
- Networks setting shared artist pay expectations across a geographic area, enabling artists to ‘hold the line’ on union recommended pay rates, avoiding the temptation to undercut one-another in order to secure work.
- Networks growing the pool of available work for artists within an area, such as by forging new commercial partnerships: *“The development and delivery of collaborative projects with local businesses including*



*commissions, workshops and pop up shops which will act as exemplars to evidence value and encourage future collaborations”.*

Creative networks illustrate in practice the potential of Community Wealth Building infrastructure for Scotland. They are embedded in local economies, and attract and retain value locally to sustain and ensure community wealth goes further. Creative networks play a vital role in delivering inclusive and resilient local economies through shared infrastructure, peer learning and mutual support.

**For consideration:**

For Community Wealth Building to be fully realised in Scotland, creative networks must be recognised and resourced as long-term civic infrastructure that grow local capabilities, anchor wealth, and support sustainable inclusive economies.



# Impact Snapshot:

## Neuk Edinburgh (Neuk Collective / Door in the Wall Arts Access CIC)

**Tell us about one key impact that Create:Networks support has made...**

**... for you and/or your funded network:**

Create:Networks gave us the time and space to try things out, learn what worked, and adapt as we went. It allowed us to genuinely involve members in shaping the programme and to test their ideas in practice, rather than deciding everything in advance. Through this process, we learned a huge amount about what works for our community, and that learning now directly informs how we design our programming.

**... for the creative practitioners who are part of your network:**

One of the clearest impacts of Create:Networks support for our members has been a strong sense of belonging and community. Feedback consistently highlights how meaningful it is to spend time in spaces led by and for neurodivergent creatives, where people feel understood, supported, and able to show up as themselves without masking. The connections formed through the network have had both professional and personal value – leading to creative collaborations, peer support, and lasting relationships that reduce isolation and help neurodivergent artists feel more confident and connected in their creative lives.

**... beyond your network:**

Create:Networks has shown the importance of supporting experimentation and development that is led by communities themselves, rather than taking a top-down approach. The funding gave us space to try things out, listen closely to lived experience, and adapt our work in response to what people actually needed. This has helped demonstrate to the wider sector that strong, sustainable networks grow through trust, flexibility, and shared decision-making, and that these approaches can lead to more meaningful and lasting impact.

# Conclusions



## What next – future support for networks

Support from Create:Networks has had a positive impact on all nine of the funded networks. Whilst the specifics of the difference it's made naturally vary from network to network, projects report that they have grown their engagement and membership numbers, seen increased levels of engagement from members (including those taking up leadership roles), invested in their infrastructure, nourished new partnerships and developed, tested, launched or researched new ways of working. Additionally, projects have benefited from the time and capacity to make longer-term and more strategic plans, to bring in additional expertise or capacity, and to adapt to better meet the needs of their community through changing circumstances. Many networks commented that support from Create:Networks benefitted their reputation and profile, and a number have gone on to secure additional funding for their work beyond this one-year period.

*“Of the nine networks, two were successful in receiving Multi-Year Funding [from Creative Scotland] – we understand that this stability will enable at least one of these recipients to continue their network plans as part of wider strategic work”.*

*“The diverse programme of activities have really helped cement the network. Seeing a range of opportunities for professional development has excited the members, because even if they didn't get involved this time they understand the potential benefits to them in the future. And in turn this means that they feel a sense of ownership and members have begun to play a much more active role in planning and organising events”.*

*“Taking time to discuss and agree the structure has been an important part of the business planning. We have successfully attracted a few younger members and this is an important step in other young people seeing themselves reflected in the organisation and its Board.”*

*“We raised funding to sustain the coordinator role and in-person network for the next two years, and secured support to expand”.*

Whilst most of the funded networks have taken steps toward their future financial sustainability, it is perhaps unsurprising from a one-year fund of this scale that most networks continue to report this ambition as a work in progress. Many described this funded year as having “*laid the foundations*” or “*planted the root system*” for their network – creating a much stronger basis from which to enable future growth, whilst leaving questions remaining as to how that growth will continue to be supported. For many networks, it is simply unrealistic to plan, test and deliver a one-year programme of activity to realise sustainability, and it is important to be proportionate in claiming the fund’s success measured on this basis.

*“In terms of support to ensure sustainability in the longer term, we are unsure if this model has been completely successful. The time factor was a challenge, to be able to concurrently deliver our activity and also be considering a sustainable future felt at times, too much. Perhaps a different plan to deliver less and spend more time on embedding sustainable futures would have been beneficial”.*

It is important to recognise this limitation not as a critique of any of the individual projects (who delivered significant impact within the scale of support available), nor of Creative Dundee. However, future rounds of this funding may do well to reflect on the structures of support required to enable financial sustainability, and to consider if the design of the fund’s focus and / or structure may be tailored to more realistically reflect the challenges involved with creating a financially sustainable network. As reflected throughout this report, some networks are more realistically able to achieve financial sustainability (in either the long or short term) than others, and a flexible programme of support for networks would recognise that one size doesn’t fit all. For some, a programme designed to support commercial activity and income-generating models would be impactful, whilst other networks (like many parts of the creative ecosystem) may simply never be financially independent from public funding, and should not be considered lesser or lacking if their ambitions lie elsewhere.

*“To thrive, we need sustainable grant funding that covers a baseline of activity. This would enable us to focus on our social and cultural goals and be ambitious without constant economic pressure. Reliable support for core operations would give us the stability to serve our members and communities while continuing to innovate”.*



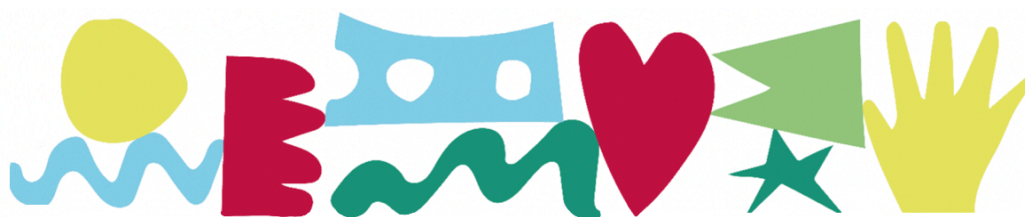
Looking ahead, the possibilities for ambitious, impactful support for creative networks may be succinctly summarised by this reflection from one of the funded networks:

*“Our understanding has grown from seeing networks as primarily a series of events or workshops to recognising them as living ecosystems that require attention to relationships, infrastructure, and participant empowerment”.*

Future initiatives to support networks would do well to start from this same understanding – recognising networks as one element of a complex, multi-faceted and interwoven creative ecosystem. The impact of investment in the practical delivery of network activity will always be exceeded by programmes of support that invest in the relationships that sit at the heart of networks, that nourish the development of infrastructure that enables devolved, co-created structures to thrive, and that connects creative networks to the wider social, political and economic systems in which they operate.

Create:Networks has demonstrated the potential of relationship-led, flexible funding, and the possibilities of investing in networks to share learning, evolve as they go, and tailor their activity to the needs of their community. The challenge ahead is to use this learning to work with a wider horizon, to recognise the potential and possibilities of networks, and to invest in them strategically, consistently and at-scale. In this way, the impact achieved over the past 12 months may be multiplied significantly.

*“In short, Create:Networks not only supported activity in the moment but also gave us the tools, capacity and evidence to secure the future sustainability of the network”.*



Great thanks goes to each of the networks who contributed their time, knowledge and learnings to this report and project.

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Creative Dundee centres creative practitioners and communities as powerful catalysts for collective good. We facilitate collaboration, nurture collective leadership and support people to imagine and act together to benefit our communities and place.

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